



According to Maria

By M^rs JOHN LANE

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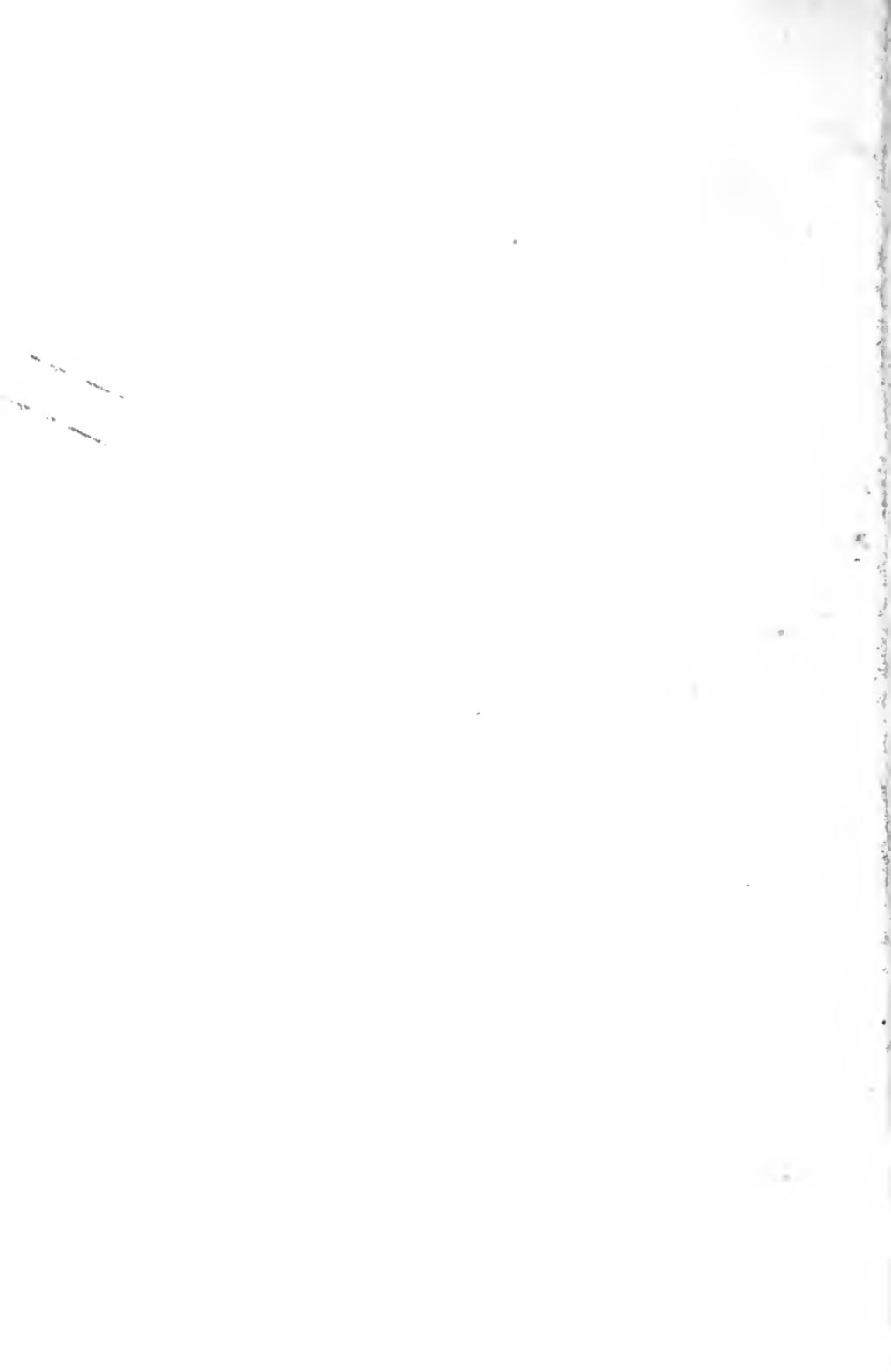
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ACCORDING TO MARIA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

KITWYK: A STORY. WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOWARD PYLE,
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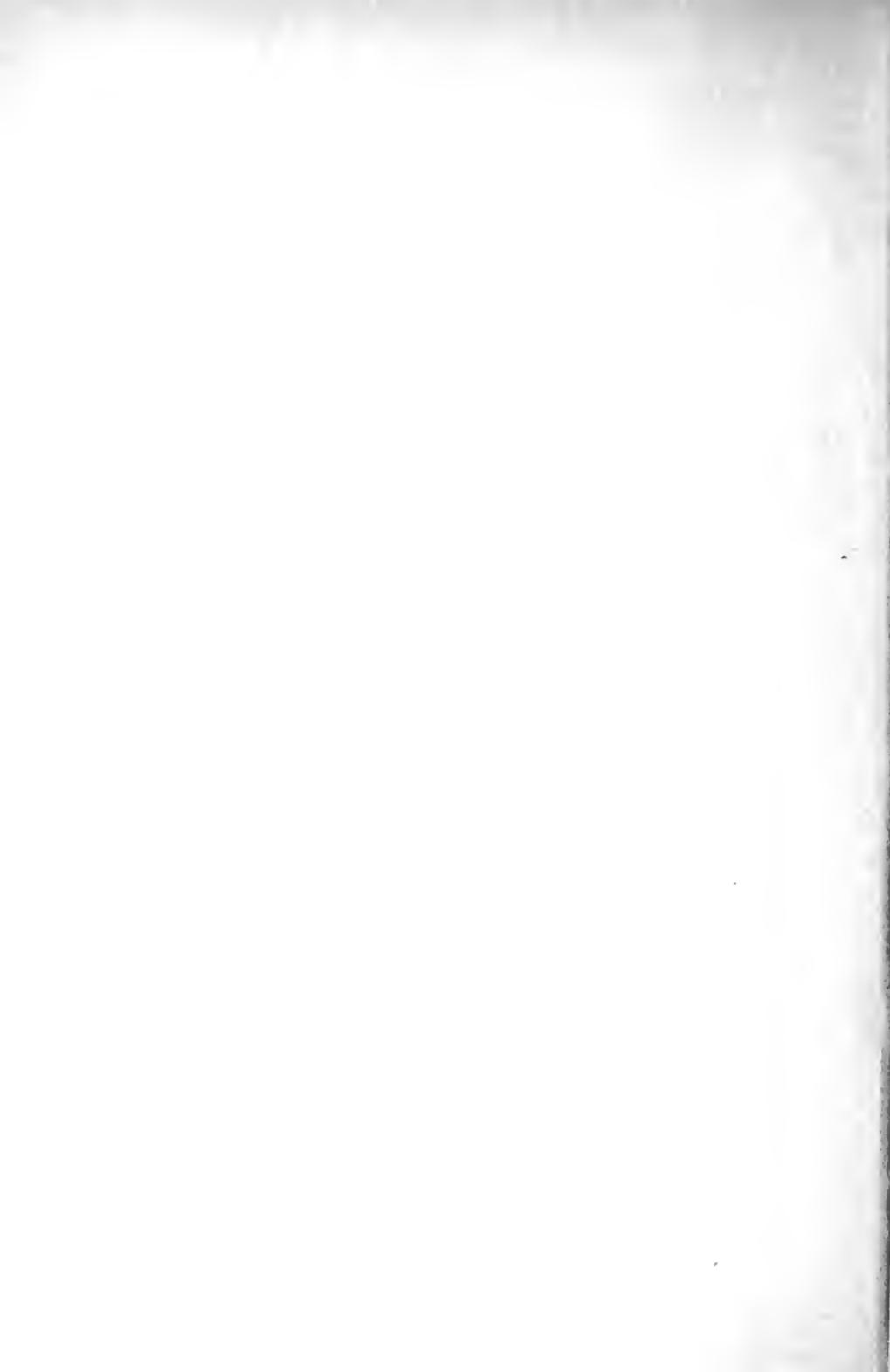
ACCORDING TO
M A R I A
BY M^{RS.} JOHN LANE
WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JOSEPH GOFTON * * *

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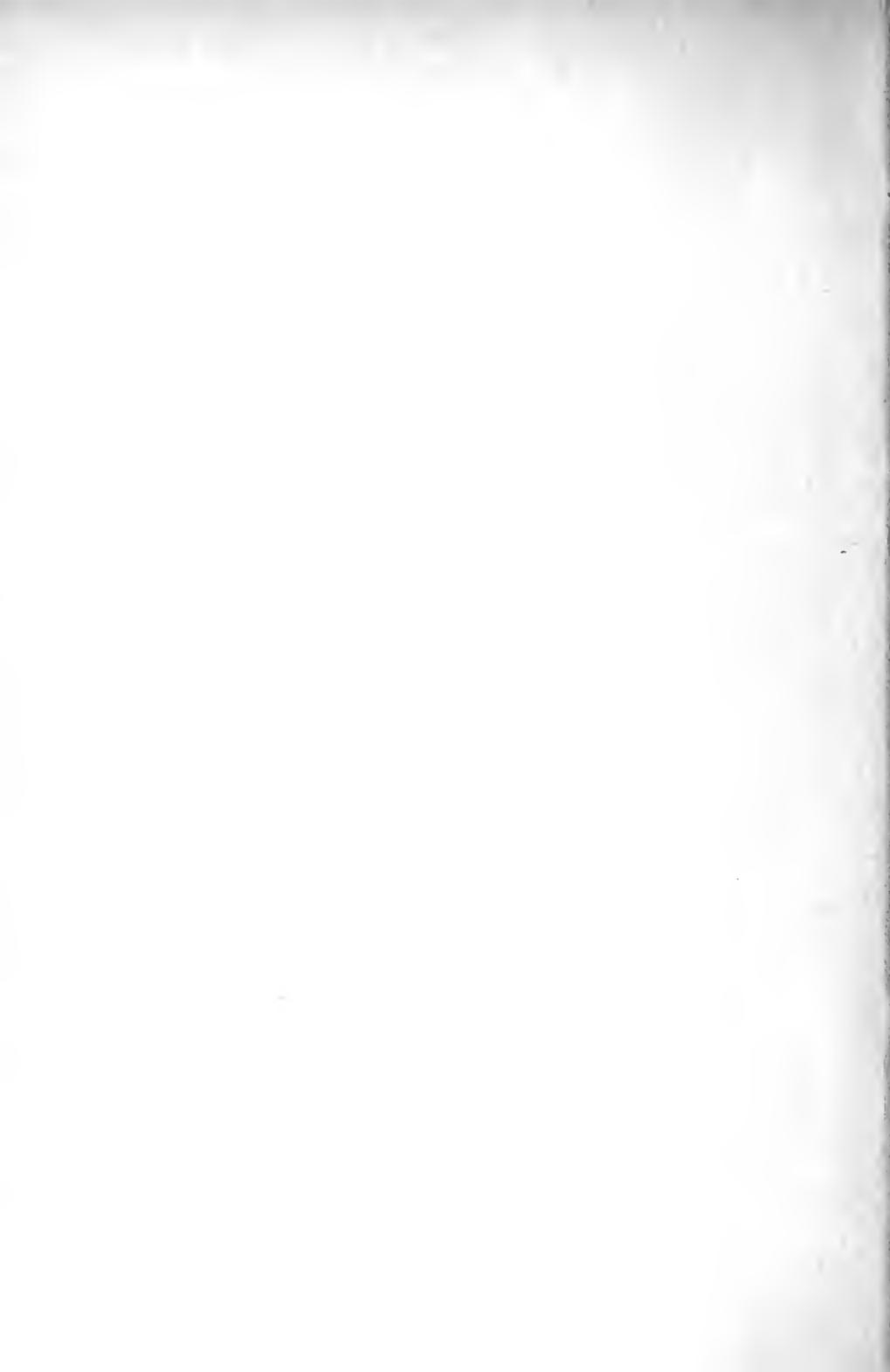
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To
KATRINA TRASK



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ACCORDING TO MARIA

I

MARIA AND HER DEAR FRIENDS

MARIA always says of herself that although she knows she isn't beautiful she is quite sure that she is stylish. She always says "stylish." She has pale, prominent eyes, a long, pale face and a rather sharp nose; she thinks a great deal of her nose. She wears her hair neatly fuzzed in front, and it always looks the same whether at breakfast or dinner parties; and whatever her emotions may be it is always tidy. She has, besides, pointed elbows and no sense of humour.

When Maria showed me her visiting list I was filled with genuine admiration; how had she even got acquainted with so many people in so short a time, and how could she find time to love them all?

Starting, as I knew, with only the Tippetts, Sir Peter and Lady Tippett, how she had progressed!

Maria always says that there is nothing she so adores as friendship, and there is nothing she so loves as to mingle with her fellow creatures in that oppor-

tunity for soul-outpouring, the afternoon call. How she reconciles this with the dreadful disappointment she feels when she calls and finds anybody at home, I do not know. But according to Maria the sole aim and object of calling seems to be to find everybody out.

There are times when Maria prefers my society to Diana's, for, as she says, broughams are bad for hats, and when she is with Diana she is never quite sure that hers is on straight; daughters don't seem to mind if mothers look anyhow.

Diana is still very young, but she has literary aspirations. She has begun an epic poem called "Boadicea," which she keeps in her upper drawer with her hair-brush. But Maria does not believe in literature as a matrimonial asset. So she discourages Diana's poetry.

Every once in a while Maria indulges in an orgie of calls when she hires a brougham and her object seems to be to see how many calls she can squeeze into two hours. Occasionally she invites me to go because she can depend on me to tell her if her hat is on straight, and, besides, it gives her a good excuse to curtail her visit if she is so unlucky as to find any one at home. For Maria is strictly truthful; I know just what she says.

"So sorry to go but Margery Brown is waiting for me in the carriage. She is such a dear thing, but she does get so cross if I keep her waiting too long."

What she says to me when she bangs the carriage door on herself is, "My dear, I thought that woman never would let me go! I wouldn't have called but I was so sure she'd be out. I could just as well have gone there by 'bus. At any rate, she's done," and Maria would scratch her off her list with natural indignation.

So this time when she took me with her she told Diana to be sure and meet us at the Pennorton's at half past five, for the Pennortons were new and desirable. She would arrange to finish her calls with the Pennortons, for she expected to find them at home. "Mind you're there," Maria called after her, "and see that you look nice and tidy," for as I said Diana is still very young and writes poetry.

"It's such a great thing," and Maria thoughtfully studied her list, "to call on people when you're quite sure they'll be out. Why, I couldn't have half as many friends if I ever found them in. And I've got to make eight calls and I mustn't be gone more than two hours, for what the livery stable charges after two hours is simply monstrous. First I'll go to Mrs. Dillbinkie's. She always plays bridge in the afternoon, so I'm safe not to see her. How I do hate her. Cat! But, then, she gives dances and Diana is growing up. Isn't this carriage shabby? Looks hired by the hour, doesn't it? And the horse don't look private either. I shall have to complain. She keeps a page-boy because the front hall isn't large enough for a footman."

We drove up to what is called a "bijou" residence, all white paint and intimate lace curtains. The page-boy said "not at home" in a shrill falsetto as if he loved telling lies, and he slammed the door on Maria as if she were no better than a parcel.

"I wanted to ring the bell again just to box his ears," and she came back in a towering rage. Indeed she was still suffering from the page-boy on our way to the Fauntleroy-Jones's. Now Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones is the only person in the world Maria would really like to find at home, but she never does. However, Maria patiently returns her own calls on Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, who by this time must have an exhaustive collection of Maria's visiting-cards.

The Fauntleroy-Joneses live in Park Lane and have statues in their front hall. They are disgracefully rich and everybody wants to know them. Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones is one of those philanthropists who promote companies, and he also comes under the heading of "magnates." He leases somebody else's ancestral castle and shootings, although he wouldn't fire off a gun himself for worlds, but he turns the young aristocracy loose on his moors. It is, however, as bread cast on the waters, for when they go home they always speak nicely of his companies.

There is also a Miss Fauntleroy-Jones who is socially much superior to her parents. Her mother grovels to her, and she is the only thing except death of which her father is afraid. She is seldom at home, being in

great demand everywhere, and she hates her mother's dinner parties although everybody else loves them, except the man who has to take down Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. When Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones is not giving a dinner party she wanders lonely and forsaken among the stately columns of her drawing-room in the company of Fido, her faithful pug. Or sometimes they look out of the window together and watch the passers-by, and they have a nice view of the fountain where three illustrious poets stand surrounded by a pleasant trickle of cold water, while on top a chilly "Fame" toots on a trumpet.

As we proceeded towards the expensive part of the town where the Fauntleroy-Joneses live in a sumptuous mansion uplifted by plaster caryatides, Maria clutched my arm as a victoria, drawn by a thoughtful looking horse with a long white chin, came towards us. A red-faced, white-whiskered old gentleman with eyes like boiled gooseberries sat beside a grim lady with a Chantilly lace veil and a Roman nose.

"I declare," Maria cried, "if it isn't the dear Tippetts. What a mercy we met them! Now I'll call on them at once," she cried, as we passed the oblivious Tippetts. And more than ever did I realise Maria's social progress when she so ardently longed to find her dear Tippetts out.

"Please hurry," Maria called imploringly to the coachman. "I'm so afraid they'll get back," she explained to me as we fled in the opposite direction.

"I don't need to bother so much about the Tippetts as I used to."

We landed quite out of breath at a dull mustard coloured house on the shady side of a dingy square that looked like a favourite trysting-place for cats. A decayed summer-house invited to repose.

The Tippetts's man-servant was foreign, and Maria had to wait ages before he opened the door, and then he was still struggling into his coat.

"Nod at home," he said, out of breath. "Sir Peter and Lady Tippett is a-taking of ze air," he added by way of unnecessary explanation. He tucked Maria up with great respect, for which he got no credit, as Maria, when we drove off, remarked with a sudden outburst of patriotism, that foreigners might possibly take our trade, and she had heard that they did better in the way of music, and, possibly, painting, though she was no judge of such trifles, but give her an English man-servant every time; that was something with which no mere foreigner could ever hope to compete.

"At any rate, we've called," said Maria. "Now for the Fauntleroy-Jones's."

Our steed, which was rather given to stumbling, seemed conscious that he was expected to put his best foot foremost. We drove up with quite an air, and Maria shook herself out and sailed up the front steps. Maria looks just as well behind as she does in front, which gives her the moral support so superior

to a good conscience. As she always says: "When you know you are all right behind you can face the world."

An immaculate being in plush said "Not at home," while a colleague in plush joined him in staring over Maria's head at the brougham. There they stood like statues in silk stockings and declined to have anything further to do with her, and they left her to open the carriage door and slam herself in.

"Insolent creatures!" and Maria sat up like a ramrod and breathed hard. I could not but acknowledge the perfection of the British Menial, but I felt that the suffering he caused was out of all proportion to the joy.

For reasons unexplained we still remained glued to the spot. I looked furtively up the steps; the silk stockings were permitting themselves the relaxation of a grin.

"Why don't you go?" and Maria forced her head out of the window to the detriment of her best hat.

"Cos you 'aven't said whir, lidy," the coachman retorted with a sense of injury.

"I make it a point," said Maria unfolding her philosophy of friendship, "never to call on any one's at-home day. At-home days are only vanity. At-home women don't want to see you, they only want you to help crowd. They hate to see you any other day. That's the reason I'm calling on Mrs. Jack Jephson. It isn't her day."

Mrs. Jack Jephson is intensely "smart," or she wouldn't be called Mrs. "Jack." She lives in a narrow, dreary street with a greengrocer on one side of her and a public house on the other; but around the corner is a square so aristocratic that it sheds a lustre over the entire neighbourhood.

As I saw Maria's skirts swish in I realised that she had made a mistake; Mrs. Jack Jephson was at home. While our driver made way for other callers, I studied his back and discovered why he did not look private. His coat was constructed for a big man and so it bulged in the back, and the collar scratched his ears. There was also a mysterious crest on his buttons, which would have puzzled the Herald's College. The only button I understood was the one that was missing.

I turned my attention to Mrs. Jephson's callers and it struck me that they were satisfied with very little of Mrs. Jephson. Maria stayed longer than anyone, which I could not understand seeing that time was money, but she was being tucked in again by a smart parlour-maid fifteen minutes after our arrival.

"She *was* in," Maria said resentfully as our steed was coaxed into that show trot sacred to "by the hour." "I hadn't called for ages and then I said I never would again. It might have been the same call. A chilly chintzy room and four women in it I didn't know. She always sits in one place like a graven image. You take the chair beside her and say things, and then she says things. Then somebody

else comes, and you get up and stare. Nobody talks because they haven't been introduced. I sat staring for ten minutes, then I got up to go. She held out a hand just like a slice of cold fish. She smiled a long, narrow smile and said she hoped I'd come again. I said I'd love to."

"Well, why did you call on her?" I remonstrated. Maria looked at me with her prominent pale grey eyes. "I only went because I was sure she'd be out," she said as if that explained everything.

When we found that the Simpson-Blotters were also in, Maria felt that the disappointment was nearly more than she could bear. We had by accident arrived at a serious function. Two small Simpson-Blotters in white with blue ribbons were flattening their noses against the dining-room window with a background of governess. All three were chewing.

The front door opened with such suddenness that Maria had barely time to put on her company expression. A job butler, who moves, as it were, in our circles and is known as Barnes, welcomed her with a look of abject relief, as if she were the first and he was quite discouraged. The preparations in the dining-room were on a magnificent scale, Maria told me afterwards, but nobody was there but the Simpson-Blotter children and the governess, and all three were eating for dear life.

Maria always says that too great preparations are the most trying of social problems. If you push your

dining-room table close to the wall and have urns and things then you betray the dizzy heights of your aspirations. According to Maria too great preparations are so frightfully visible. The dining-table is so out of its element and there are things on it which you see at no other time. Of course if you are the only person in the room you have a chance to make a good square meal before you climb up stairs to shake hands with your hostess. It is a terrible trial to be the only guest; the hostess smiles at you tremulously, but there is a far-away look in her eyes as if she were listening to the front-door bell. She replies at random. Mrs. Simpson-Blotter did. All the drawing-room furniture had been pushed back so there was an awful vacant Desert of Sahara in the middle. Maria greeted two out-of-date old ladies in the Desert of Sahara, maiden aunts of the Simpson-Blotters, who usually didn't count, and then they all stared longingly at the door for other guests. A shy man straggled in and looked forlornly about, and the maiden aunts, greatly encouraged, asked if he'd had tea.

Maria had no compassion. Why should she, it wasn't her at-home? She couldn't be made to stay, though all at once they realised her value as a human being. The maiden aunts clung to her and so did Mrs. Simpson-Blotter, and the forlorn man looked more than ever forlorn, but Maria couldn't be made to stay.

Barnes shut Maria into the brougham with evident regret. He was a loyal soul, although he was only temporary, and we left him looking wistfully up and down the street in a vain search for other guests. As for Maria, she was so resigned, considering how she had been taken in, that I felt sure that she had been recompensed for so disastrously finding the Simpson-Blotters at home. Before long I found out; it was the tea.

"Of course," she said, "the preparations were too ridiculous for words. It's such bad taste to have too much. Still it did me good, for I was feeling quite faint."

I was silently reflecting on my own exhausted condition when we drove up to a huge brick structure, a cross between a penitentiary and a sardine box. We paused at the principal door, and our steed settled himself solidly on his four legs. Maria was gone about two minutes, and then she flew back panting, and the hall-porter banged the door quite respectfully after her. Hall-porters are much more broad-minded than footmen. I have even seen them civil to a four-wheeler.

"Fancy," she cried in horror, "Mrs. Peebles *was* in! I barely escaped seeing her."

I congratulated Maria on her miraculous escape. "Of course she will be Lady Peebles some day if her brother-in-law dies, so it won't do not to call," Maria explained.

"Is he ill?" I asked solicitously; I'd never heard of the Peebles before.

"O dear, no. The fact is he's just going to get married. Mean of him, ain't it? Still you never can tell. But to think she was in," and she reverted to her escape. "When I asked the porter he hesitated and then he said yes she was in, and was I Madame Podsky? Madame Podsky!" Her British soul revolted at the foreign name.

"I had just presence of mind enough to say, 'Oh, I see, she's only in to Madame,' and then I ran, I was so afraid he'd say he'd go up and see. What an escape. At any rate I've called on Sophia Peebles."

It was at the Crockers—Crocker M. P.—that Maria tore a fearful split along the whole length of her glove trying to open the brougham door, while Crocker M. P.'s footman looked idly on from his pedestal in the front-door, where he had just languidly delivered himself of "not at home." It was not until we got away from his freezing presence that she recovered her spirits. It took Maria a long time to get over Crocker M. P.'s footman. Weeks after, when I saw her again, she cried triumphantly, "Crocker's out!"

As I did not understand she explained that at the general election Crocker had been beaten out of his boots and having now ceased to be an M. P. he had also ceased to be a coveted ornament to a dinner party. It was in this circuitous way that she revenged herself on the Crockers' footman.

It was, however, when Maria directed her coachman to drive to Lambeth that I realised that she was human and in need of sympathy. Even the modest sometimes get tired of being snubbed by the menials of the rich and great!

Now no one lives in Lambeth except the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that there is only one. So it must make it very lonely for him. The rest of the population doesn't count and most of it circulates on the street. What is left over is apologetic and tries to explain how it happens to be living there. In Lambeth our equipage was properly respected and our coachman nearly looked private. The maid who opened the door smiled the friendly smile of the suburbs. Maria's dear friend was out, but a great glory was cast over the establishment, for the neighbours, who were all looking on, could see that it was on visiting terms with "carriage people." Quite a little crowd collected to see us start off again, which we did with great dignity. "Now I'm going to the Pennorton's," said Maria.

"My dear, look at your glove; you can't," I remonstrated. But Maria said that she had fifteen minutes to spare and she had no intention of presenting them to the livery stable. And didn't I remember that Diana was to meet us there? It was to be a return call for one made on her by Mrs. Pennorton when Maria was out. So far the friendship had only

been fanned by the masculine head of the Pennerton family inviting Samuel to a sympathetic B. & S. at his Club. Samuel was the masculine head of Maria's family.

We drove through an interminable avenue of plaster. Miles of surprised looking plaster lions kept guard on both sides of each front door. A beneficent twilight made our carriage look quite private. I observed two separate streams of carriages driving up to two adjacent front doors. Evidently two "at-homes" were going on side by side, and two sets of adjacent lions were devouring independent callers.

It was a chilly Spring evening and the sky was barred with grey and a faint acid yellow. An icy wind whirled dust through the long dreary street, and even the lions looked chilly.

"Maria," I said decidedly, "I'm going in with you, for if I don't have a hot cup of tea I shall have pneumonia."

"I shan't be gone ten minutes," Maria remonstrated.

"Ten minutes would about finish me," I said resolutely, and followed in her wake behind a whole string of friends. For a moment we were blocked by irresponsible affection exchanging soul to soul outpourings in the middle of the doorway, quite oblivious of the impatient friends who wanted to get in, and those who wanted to get out.

It was a brand-new house of a blue tufted satin

kind, with oil paintings to match, and floods of electric light. Maria, with the cruelty of one who has had tea, sailed past the dining-room where picture hats were refreshing themselves with sandwiches and other convivialities. She is a little apt to be haughty at the wrong time, and then she throws her name at a servant as if it were a bone; sometimes he picks it up and sometimes he doesn't. This time he didn't. He was a haughty butler and he did not seem to care much what he called the company. Three picture hats, one bald gentleman and a wig were ahead of us, and he announced a series of names and then left it to the hostess to disentangle them, while he washed his hands of further responsibility.

Mrs. Pennerton was large and expansive, with a wide smile and inexhaustible cordiality.

"How do? So glad to see you! Had tea?" she cried in turn to the picture hats, the bald gentleman and the wig, and she shook their hands in a frenzy of friendship. Whereupon she propelled them forward by the mere force of her welcome and they were lost in space.

"How do?" Mrs. Pennerton cried to Maria. "So glad to see you! Had tea?" Then she caught sight of me. "How do? So glad to see you! Had tea?"

She held my hand and smiled like the rising sun, but while she still held my hand her expansive smile already settled on the next friend. The temporary quality of Mrs. Pennerton's cordiality was immense.

Maria tried to linger, but even she had to give in to the motive power of Mrs. Pennorton's great, bland smile, and she found herself in the drawing-room before she knew it, where the other guests sat speechlessly about on blue satin chairs and really appeared all the more gloomy by contrast with Mrs. Pennorton's smile. We took refuge from the electric light under an imitation palm, while a gramaphone softly bellowed out Caruso's latest, through which we could distinctly hear, "How do? So glad to see you! Had tea?"

"I think we'd better be going," said Maria, who hates music. We emerged from under the imitation palm and wedged our way through an opposing stream still advancing upstairs to bask in Mrs. Pennorton's smile.

"Good-bye," Maria said, taking hasty advantage of a lull.

"G'bye. So glad to have seen you. Had tea?" and Mrs. Pennorton smiled the same indefatigable smile as if she had never seen us before.

"So sorry to have been out when you called," and Maria tried hurriedly to catch Mrs. Pennorton's fleeting attention.

"So was I," Mrs. Pennorton began, but her gaze wandered and she turned her voluble smile on a clerical gentleman in knee-breeches. "How do? So glad to see you! Had tea?" she exclaimed in an ecstasy of cordiality, whereupon she dropped us so

suddenly that it quite hurt. But just as we went rather gloomily downstairs Maria remembered Diana. Diana who had been told to meet her at the Pennortons' at half past five, and now it was nearly six.

"Tiresome child!" Maria cried in a temper, and I really couldn't blame her. "She's always late. Comes of writing poetry. If it's a minute over the two hours, goodness knows what they'll charge. I'll give her a talking to! We won't wait for her." However, I rebelled and insisted on having tea.

"I shouldn't like to live next door to any one who had my at-home day," Maria said thoughtfully, as we stood on the doorstep waiting for the carriage, while we watched the next door's bosom friends file in and out. "But isn't dear Mrs. Pennerton sweet!" she cried in admiring retrospection. "So cordial. The kind of person one would like to go to in any trouble."

I saw at once that Maria had been greatly impressed—probably by the furniture.

Here the carriage ambled up and Maria got in, and I was just about to follow her when a rather plump young thing with cheeks like a peach, a snippy nose and a flying boa skipped down to us from the next door's "at-home" and clutched my arm.

"Where under the sun have you been," she exclaimed with indignant reproach. "Where's mother?"

Here Maria put her head out and announced herself with a great deal of emphasis.

"I should like to know where you have been?"

"Been? Why I've been waiting for you at the Pennorton's since half past five," Diana said with a deep sense of injury. "And as I had to do something I took three cups of tea and two ices, and I was introduced to Mrs. Pennerton five times, and then she didn't remember me. I thought you'd never come! Where have you been?"

"At the Pennorton's, of course," and Maria looked at her child in growing irritation.

"But what have you been doing in that house, Diana?" I interposed, pointing to the wrong lions.

"Been doing? Calling there, of course. The Pennortons."

"But that isn't the Pennortons? Who is it?"

"Isn't the Pennortons? Of course it is," and Diana stared at us. "Why, where have you and mother been?"

"Are you quite sure that's the Pennortons?" I urged.

Diana being literary, her soul is of course athirst for "copy." She skipped for joy, for she felt that she had never been so near a plot before.

"Well, if you're sure that's the Pennortons, then I don't know on whom we have been calling! Maria! do you hear?" I cried into the carriage, "we haven't been calling on the Pennortons at all!"

"You've been calling on the wrong people, mother!" and Diana hopped with excitement.

"For mercy's sake, on whom have we been calling?" Maria cried in a strangled voice out of the gloom.

"I don't know," and Diana was full of unfilial rapture, "but I heard Mrs. Pennerton say that they are new people and they have five motor cars and the same at-home day, and that's the reason she hates 'em."

"And I have lost twenty minutes," Maria wailed. "And she was so cordial. And all the time she probably wondered who I was."

"Not a bit of it," and I regained my composure, "anyhow, what difference does it make? Friends all look alike."

"Do come now and call on the right Mrs. Pennerton!" Diana coaxed. "It's so lovely; just like a play. And I'll have another ice."

But Maria wouldn't.

"I can't," she cried greatly depressed. "It'll cut right into a new hour. And I've wasted twenty minutes on people I don't know. Say 'home,' Diana. Get in. There's the little seat. How much room you do take up."

And Diana said "home," and smothered her giggles in the feather boa.

Maria tried to say something, but gave it up; her feelings were too much for her. Finally she studied her bracelet watch, and then her face relaxed.

"If he has anything of a conscience he can do it in the hour," and she breathed a sigh of relief. By

the time she thumped her own knocker (within the hour) she spoke with a good deal of feeling.

"After all," she said, "what would life be without friends?"

"The friends who are out or the friends you don't know?" I asked.

But Maria has no sense of humour.

Diana giggled.

II

THE EVOLUTION OF MARIA

MARIA and I had not met for years when I saw her again. At least I didn't really see her, for she was under a tipped-over hansom cab in Regent Street. It was an accident, and the cab and cabby, the horse and Maria, were all in a heap. So far as could be seen Maria still clutched a white silk parasol, and the ruins of the cab windows were scattered over her hat.

I happened to be wedged in the crowd that collected, which pushed me forward in spite of myself, just as Maria was pulled out from under the hansom. However, as I said before, at that time I had not the least idea that it was Maria, for we hadn't met for years and she was so damaged. She still clung to her parasol in a dazed way, but she shook herself free from a crowd of good Samaritans with dirty hands. It was then, with the aid of a policeman, that I helped her into the nearest shop, which was a furrier's, and big, cool and empty. She was rather scratched and stunned, and there was mud on her face, while her hat, full of broken glass, was

crushed over her head; but she still clung to her parasol.

As I revived her with *sal volatile*, and tried to disentangle her features from the damage, I struggled with vague recollections, until, suddenly, she sat up, gave me a petulant push and looked wildly about.

"Do get me a hand-glass," she cried. "I want to see if my hat is on straight!" Then I recognized her.

"For goodness' sake, Maria, if it isn't you!" I gasped. I hadn't heard her say that for years, but I should have known her by it anywhere. How often she used to say it at school! For Maria and I had been to school together at Brighton.

Maria drew herself up and stared at me with considerable dignity considering the state of her hat and the mud on her chin.

"Margery Brown? Well, I do declare! You have grown grey! And didn't I always tell you not to wear blue? It makes you look as yellow as yellow. But you never did know how to dress." Here she examined me up and down: "You look Clapham. Live there still?"

"You used to think Clapham very smart," I said rather nettled.

"Did I really?" and Maria studied the damage to herself in the hand-glass. "Fancy! That was ages ago. Now," she remarked with considerable condescension, "now we live in Bayswater."

Maria was so obviously sure that she was going to impress me that I was humanly pleased to disappoint her.

"So do I," I replied, and I realised what a blow it was to her, for it took her a moment to rally, during which a four-wheeler ambled up from the ranks.

"And as I am going your way I'll see you home, Maria," I added politely.

As we jolted through Oxford Street, past the Marble Arch, and the dog cemetery in Hyde Park, she began to thaw visibly, especially when she found out where I lived, and that we had the front of our house painted every year.

"That's the advantage of being single and having no family," she said plaintively, "you can afford to."

And when I had delivered her over to a nice house with a green balcony and a green front door she was so full of emotion that she begged me to come in and have tea, and by the time the green front door was opened by a rigid parlour-maid, who looked at Maria's damage with a cold, unsympathetic eye, Maria declared that there was nothing like the friends of one's childhood.

"And wasn't it providential that I only had on my second best hat!" she exclaimed as we sat hand in hand on a very hard Empire sofa and waited for tea. "And not a spot on my white parasol! Talk of mercies!" she said devoutly. "And when I see you sit-

ting there I think of that navy blue alpaca I had at school, with two rows of velvet. Don't you remember? Sweet dress, wasn't it?"

So like Maria; her own things always seemed to her of such monumental importance. And indeed I remembered that blue alpaca and the airs Maria put on when she wore it back to school, for when she bent her knees it touched the ground. It was at this time that Maria used to get up at night, when the teacher thought we were safe in bed and sound asleep, and do her hair in wonderful ways by the light of a private candle. The things she did with three feathers out of a feather duster, stuck in the back of her head, just as they wear them at Court!

I first knew Maria through her Uncle Titcomb. At that time he was only a junior in father's office, although even then he was quite bald and elderly. Father was a solicitor and we lived at Clapham; he used to say he could set the clock by Uncle Titcomb, he was so punctual. He cycled over from Brixton every morning and rang the office bell just as the clock struck half past eight. There wasn't a girl in school who didn't know at once that Uncle Titcomb paid Maria's schooling, which proved conclusively that her nearest and dearest were h. u., which, interpreted, meant hard up.

I suppose he sent her to Brighton at father's advice, and I remember how we discussed her before she arrived, as we marched, a decorous band in pig-

tails and sailor hats, along the Kemptown cliffs. But she hadn't been a day at school before she began to brag about her Uncle Titcomb in a most unjustifiable way, I thought, seeing he still stood up when father came into the room. But I realised that this was to offset Maria's mother being in trade. For of course all the girls knew in no time that Maria's mother did millinery in a small way in Brixton.

On the other hand, we understood that Maria's father was a perfect gentleman and did nothing at all. Only at one time he did keep Maria's mother's accounts and that was the reason, father said, she failed. Still his family were very proud of him, even Uncle Titcomb, and they all pitied him very much for having married Maria's mother, which, they all said, ruined his prospects. From Maria's description the big girls at school said he was just like a hero of romance, and of course they knew.

Still, when he came one day by a cheap excursion train to see Maria, we were conscious of disenchantment. His hair did curl in ringlets all over his head, just as Maria said it did, but we detected with eagle eyes that he was getting bald under his ringlets, and that his eyes were tired and blurred. But he had a straight, well-bred nose, and his moustache was beautifully waxed, just as Maria said it was. At lunch he sat next to the head-mistress and he talked in a most elegant way about the poets, and held up both his little fingers

as he cut the boiled mutton, which was in its normal condition—tough.

When Maria's mother came we all felt that Maria did not want her to come, for she had trade written all over her. Besides, her sleeves were quite out of date and her left forefinger was pricked with much sewing. Afterwards Maria tried to explain her sleeves away and said how much better her father might have done, for she knew of a lady who had been desperately in love with him and who kept a butler.

Later on Maria returned to school at two different times in new mourning, and we received her with hushed respect, and she put on great airs because of her superior afflictions and her prospects, for now that she was an orphan she was to live at Brixton with her Uncle Titcomb. As Uncle Titcomb freely admitted to my father, he didn't like it but he couldn't help himself. I must confess that I felt quite honoured when Maria selected me for intimacy because her afflictions certainly made her rather important. And even then she was always telling me things as we strolled along the foot of the garden, where one has a glimpse of the sea over the hedge. Not that she ever wanted me to tell her things; for when I did she always looked over my head with a far-away look as if she were thinking of something else. She had an odd memory, and even when one hadn't seen her for years she had a disconcerting way of taking up

the threads of friendship just where she had dropped them. So when she told me that blue made me look yellow, I remembered she had said that the very last time we met. But she was always heroic about being rude; so many friends are.

Before long I discovered that Maria was quite in fashion, for she had a past: she had come from Brixton. And she never seemed to rise superior to that lamentable fact unless she had on a very good dress; a good dress alone gave her that sense of perfect peace which a good conscience was quite unable to bestow. And yet she always declared that she was a philosopher, it ran in her family; although she was sorry to say that Samuel was not a philosopher. But possibly that was because Samuel did not really belong to her family. Still, in spite of being a philosopher, she confessed to me that one of the greatest obstacles in her social career was the name Samuel had bestowed on her in the Wesleyan Chapel in Brixton—Smith. Indeed she never ceased pointing out to him that Smith is an impossible name with which to aspire, and when that is further handicapped by retail groceries she felt the burden too much for her. When Samuel asked, why then bother about it, she remarked plaintively that it was only because of Diana.

Maria in the contemplation of the drawbacks of Smith as a name had quite forgotten that in a modest way she had done all she could to help Samuel

make up his undecided mind. For Samuel's mind *had* been undecided, and it is quite true that she had helped him to make it up. Brixton even went so far as to say that at first Samuel didn't realise he had proposed, and when he finally did he fled distracted, and wandered all night through Brixton in such a wild and aimless way that he aroused the suspicion of the policeman whose beat ran past the Canning public house. And later when he announced to his Aunt Martha, whom he had inherited from his father and who had always kept house for him, that he was about to bring a bride to the first floor over the shop in the Brixton Road, he gave her a terrible shock. However, she got more than even with Maria by declaring publicly that no one could have been more surprised at being engaged than Samuel was himself. Whereupon she gathered up her caps—she was a dressy old lady—and her savings, and retreated to the Plymouth Brethren.

So Maria remained victorious behind the black and gold signboard, and it was perhaps because of Aunt Martha that she never let Samuel forget that her Uncle Titcomb was socially high above groceries. And, indeed, Uncle Titcomb by this time moved in the very best dissenting circles, and he always wore black broadcloth, and an evangelical barber cut his beard in the most exclusive evangelical fashion. Perhaps the only blemish in Uncle Titcomb was his too intense interest in foreign missions, for when he was

annoyed with Maria he expressed a disquieting affection for the heathen.

In those early days when Maria was first married and before she began to aspire, I used to go over to Brixton to see her while she still lived over the same shop in the Brixton Road in which Samuel's father had prospered. It was next to Hockin & Hicks, the enterprising drapers and the pride of Brixton, who in the process of expansion had already swallowed three neighbouring shops. Maria followed the expansion of Hockin & Hicks with a jealous eye, gloomily conscious that socially the drapery business is on a higher plane than groceries. I also discovered that there was only one day a week when Maria rose superior to groceries and approved of Samuel, and that was on Sundays. For on Sundays when Samuel went to Chapel he looked quite like a retired army officer, although, possibly, his eyes were too mild. But he had a fierce, bristly kind of moustache and a superior build of nose that were most deceptive, and as he grew bald Maria made him part his hair low down on one side and plaster the ends over his head where they deceived no one. He had, however, one habit that irritated Maria beyond words; he always gave a little cough before he spoke, a habit of his early days when he stood patiently behind the counter waiting for an undecided customer to make up her mind. By temperament Samuel enjoyed melancholy, and he

also liked to go to funerals, even when they did not concern him.

Maria's rule over Samuel was an autocracy alleviated by Diana. For Diana he loved even more than the grocery business, which was saying much. Maria herself was, I used to think, less an object of love than a matter of habit. The way with some men.

But Samuel was not without aspirations of his own: one was to have a nice family tomb somewhere near Brixton, for he quite looked forward to being buried there. He thought there was no place in the world so beautiful as Brixton, with the two dingy railway bridges spanning one end of the Brixton Road, over which perpetual trains rattled and screeched, and at the other, with its back to the sunset, the Parish Church in a haze of green and surrounded by quiet old graves, that suggested a pleasant rest for Brixton after it was tired out with shopping in the long, gay street brilliant with plate glass and electric lights.

Years after he described to me with a shudder that awful summer when Maria took him to Switzerland. He couldn't begin to tell me how he hated Switzerland—so many mountains. He remembered looking at the snow-capped "Jungfrau" from the Interlaken hotel and pining in a desperate way for Brixton with the long, flat street, and the language he could understand. It was Maria's first social flight, and to look at her no one would ever have connected her with

groceries, and she quite captivated two delightful Americans who were greatly flattered at being noticed by English people. They explained to her that they were American by accident, for their ancestors had gone over to America on the "Mayflower" and they wished they hadn't. And Maria and Samuel both wondered what the Mayflower was. The two delightful Americans quite adored England, and they despised people in trade, because that was so English. They were going to London to discover their coat of arms, and they rather annoyed Maria by insisting on seeing Samuel's coat of arms. But Maria told them, with much presence of mind, that they had left it at home. In private she ordered Samuel not to say a word about the shop at Brixton, Americans being so painfully aristocratic.

They "raved" over Maria; they said she was so stylish. They were fearfully stylish themselves. They went on an excursion together to the Grindelwald, and while they looked at the immemorial mountains they begged Maria to tell them the best shops in London. Meanwhile Samuel strayed into an ice-cavern and forgot to put up his umbrella against the thaw, and when he came out his hat looked like a wilted muffin, and Maria looked at him in italics. But he didn't care, he was so homesick. It was Samuel's opinion that he would have died had he stayed an hour longer in Switzerland than he did.

Still Samuel had his own pleasures. Business being

over he was very keen on taking long walks in search of a pleasant burial place, or he loved to stroll through Effra Road for the purpose of choosing a desirable "residence," for he longed to live in Effra Road before he died. Unhappily Maria had other aspirations, and he couldn't induce her to join him in his excursions either in search of a satisfactory cemetery or a house, for she took no interest in being buried and she had no intention of living in Effra Road.

Effra Road is a stately street of important suburban residences behind long, narrow front gardens full of flower-beds and shrubs. It begins with the Parish Church and ends with the Canning public house. There are two or three detached villas in Effra Road that cast a glory over Brixton, and it was Samuel's ambition to live in one of them. In front of the Canning public house stands the only statue in Brixton; and it is understood to represent the great Canning suffering from a broken nose. Some scoffers declare that it isn't Canning at all, but Diogenes, who happened to be dropped there from a cart full of statues bound for the Crystal Palace, and was picked up by the landlord of the Canning public house, who set him on a pedestal in front of it, and, in a genial, irresponsible way, named him after his own patron. But Brixton still believes it is Canning. Samuel does.

Maria's aspirations were totally different. She longed to get away from Brixton and the smell of coffee. "S. Smith" ground their own coffee on the

premises, and the grinding and the smell were sometimes more than she could bear. She longed for a semi-detached stucco villa in a high class suburb where she need not smell coffee unless she chose. She wanted to forget that Samuel kept groceries, and even when he opened a little branch shop in Lambeth and announced that he had been honoured by the sacred custom of the Archbishop, it left her cold. Indeed she said that although she would love to be invited to the Archbishop's garden parties, she didn't much care whether he got his groceries from Samuel or not.

Even when, in the course of time, little offshoots of the prosperous shop in the Brixton Road began to dot the near suburbs and dazzle with plate glass, the only interest she took in them was that they might help her to turn Samuel into a limited liability company. For she felt, not unreasonably, that a limited liability company takes away some of the disgrace of a retail grocery business.

So she began by telling Samuel that she only expected to live once and she did not wish to end her earthly existence in Brixton. Of course she only lived for him and Diana as he knew, but she did wish to live for him and Diana somewhere else. And although she realised that he would never be wholesale, for wholesale, she implied, takes away all the disgrace, still she said, he could make himself nearly as good as wholesale by turning "S. Smith" into a limited liability company. Before she died, she said

with considerable pathos, she wanted to think of him not as a grocer but as a managing director. She pointed out to him that people who invest in pork do not necessarily become pork butchers, and both groceries and pork when conducted in a superior limited liability company way do not prevent anyone from mingling with the noblest in the land, as he would know if he read *The Morning Post*. Not that she aspired to mingle with the noblest in the land, she said in a resigned way, but she did hope before she died to live at Clapham. She felt that life would be worth living if she could live in a semi-detached house in Macaulay Road, Clapham, and not smell coffee. All this Maria urged, for I heard her, not in her domestic voice but in her company voice, and she had not been so affable to Samuel since the night he proposed, although he was not sure yet that he ever had proposed. But he was quite melted, for it was just then Christmas pudding time which makes the heart soft.

So Samuel turned himself into "Smith Limited," and Maria declared to me that she felt as if she had been born again, for Samuel had ceased to be a grocer and was now for the first time a gentleman. She looked at him critically and I knew she was making up her mind just how she would dress him as soon as they left Brixton. So I was not surprised when she told me one day that she would make him wear spats and an eye-glass. But she confessed that she was terribly discouraged by his cough.

III

THE HICKSES

WHEN Maria lived next door to the Hickses she used to pretend not to feel pleased when Mrs. Hicks invited her to tea. She always went, although she made a point of saying that she would not be patronized by a Mrs. Hicks, she with an Uncle Titcomb (as if Uncle Titcomb were a kind of decoration).

Tea at Mrs. Hicks's was a serious function, not a mere clinging to the edge of a stiff chair and balancing a cup of alarming attenuity as they do in the West End, but everybody but Mr. Hicks sat at table and ate seriously. At tea time Mr. Hicks unbent and rested for a space from the cares of the drapery business. He was a short, thickset man with little, sharp eyes and flowing side whiskers. At such times he reclined at ease in a brocaded plush arm-chair, his sturdy legs on another, and smoked a pipe, his frock coat unbuttoned displaying a great gold watch chain with a heavy gold masonic emblem. His other insignia of office, an immaculate silk hat which he always wore as he patrolled the shop, rested on a harmonium, out of which Mrs. Hicks extracted hymns

on Sunday afternoons. On a small table in front of the middle window stood a singular plaster ornament under glass, a kind of Greek summer house in which a couple of turtle doves billed and cooed. This had been the crown and glory of Mrs. Hicks's wedding cake and represented the romance of her existence, for Mrs. Hicks adored Mr. Hicks and she never ceased wondering what she had done to deserve that extraordinary man. But as she was the only child of Hockin, late of Hockin & Hicks, Brixton said, in spiteful moments, that it only shows what money can do.

Mr. Hicks's manner had been his fortune. It had bewitched the late Miss Hockin when he had only been one of her father's young gentlemen. He was then slight and pale with a shiny sweep of black hair across his forehead, and when he bent forward with both hands on the counter and looked at a customer with ingratiating eyes, a good many Brixton young ladies bought things they did not want.

Indeed it was a saying which Mr. Hicks repeated rather often in his hours of relaxation, while his legs reposed on the brocaded plush, that success in business isn't selling people what they want, any fool can do that, but it's selling them what they don't want.

Mr. Hicks was apt to use Samuel as a sympathetic lay figure on whom to unfold his aspirations in the drapery line. But Samuel had heard this business axiom so often that he could only greet it with a feeble smile. He himself had never yet been able to

persuade a customer that she wanted soap when she asked for tea. Still he was always ready to listen to Mr. Hicks's aspirations, and he was full of sympathy although Maria had educated him to do without sympathy himself, which was just as well, as sympathy is undoubtedly very weakening. He greatly admired Mr. Hicks, who would, however, have been much disappointed had he known for what Samuel admired him most. It was that he never hesitated to put his feet on anything that Mrs. Hicks held sacred, and that he dared to smoke anywhere.

In a way Samuel had himself constructed the rod that so often smote him, for he had once, unluckily, told Maria that Mr. Hicks had that wonderful combination, a wholesale soul and a retail eye, and Maria, who took no interest either in Mr. Hicks's soul or his eye, treasured this remark in order to reproach Samuel, when she was cross, with only having a retail soul as well as a retail eye. Sometimes I did wonder how Samuel would feel if Maria should look at him as adoringly as Mrs. Hicks looked at Mr. Hicks, and whether it might help his soul to become wholesale?

He was so modest that he hardly valued the little branch shops at their proper worth; still when a cart galloped past with "Smith Ltd." on it in big black letters, he must have realised in a modest way that it was his soul, although it was only a retail soul, which animated the cart, the horse and the driver.

The one thing for which he really envied Mr. Hicks

was his freedom from bondage. He himself could only evade Maria's eye on bank holidays, which Maria rightly considered most vulgar. So on bank holidays Samuel and Diana would escape across the tired out London streets towards the river, where strange ships lie at anchor against the dingy wharves and the city is stricken with the deadly stillness of a London holiday.

And Diana hung on his arm, and she had red cheeks and a brown pigtail and her progress consisted of a hop and a skip, and they were, so to speak, one soul, only Diana's was a cheerful soul. In these flights they were occasionally joined by a boy in a tight jacket, a broad white collar and a bowler hat, and a nose that had not yet made up its mind. Then Diana turned red, and giggled, for this was Dicky Hicks, and Dicky Hicks was sweet on her. For Dicky was twelve and she was eight, and although Dicky aspired to be a great draper like his father, with the same wisdom, the same watch chain, and the same side whiskers, still sometimes he longed, so Diana told me privately, to be a pirate with pistols. And then he would fly with her in one of those rakish foreign ships, the very smell of which, she admitted, nearly made him seasick, to a divine country where they could eat toffee for ever and nobody say things. For, although still in knickers, Dicky had the soul of a hero, and in the course of strenuous studies in the best commercial school in Brixton he always had one



THE FREEDOM OF SAMUEL



or often both eyes in a green or yellow stage. He yearned to punch somebody's head, with Diana next door looking on, for he had queer feelings towards Diana under his little waistcoat, the outward sign of which was that he occasionally brushed his thick black thatch of hair when he hoped to meet her, although he despised his own weakness as unworthy of a boy of his muscle. But there, 'tis ever so!

Unfortunately, it must be confessed, the time came when Dicky suffered a change and became as adamant to Diana next door. He even ceased to wash his hands in her honour, although they usually needed it badly, and on Sundays in chapel, although Diana was quite beautiful in pink ribbons, and threw him little appealing glances behind Maria's unconscious back, they rebounded harmlessly against his Sunday jacket. His eye had grown ascetic, and he remarked that Diana was ridiculously young for a boy of his years, besides, she turned her toes in. Indeed he was so filled with misanthropy that he stuck out his tongue at her the next time they met, and this in the very shop where she had once treated him to a penny-worth of toffee, and nobly refused to go shares.

And as if further to celebrate his freedom from Diana he at once fell desperately in love with his Sunday School teacher, a young thing of forty.

Such was Dicky Hicks at this period of his career, when nothing seemed to meet, and buttons, when on, were but a snare and a delusion.

IV

THE ASPIRATIONS OF MARIA

O sooner was Samuel the managing director of Smith Ltd. than of course he found himself living in a brick semi-detached villa in Macaulay Road, Clapham, which at that time represented the height of Maria's aspirations. It was the kind of semi-detached that shares a column with its neighbour. With a too rigid sense of justice the neighbour's half was brown and Maria's was white. Here Samuel, instead of the bustling Brixton Road, had a view of a thriving monkey-tree and a phalanx of little stiff shrubs at the foot of his half of the lawn, supported by a brick wall surmounted by broken bottle-glass as a discouragement to cats and burglars. That it did not discourage cats he was prepared to testify.

Here Maria took a long and exultant breath. Brixton lay behind her and in her new drawing room was the ideal of a carpet, fawn coloured with splashes of roses; then there were, too, innumerable *étagères* with unsteady vases and cups and saucers and things. The furniture was of a fawn coloured satin, four chairs, two arm-chairs and a sofa, rather narrow in the seat but very puffy; and against the back of each chair

was an antimacassar. In the bow window between the lace curtains was a bust of Clytie. On the days that Uncle Titcomb came over from Brixton Maria exchanged Clytie for the Family Bible which he had given her as a wedding present; but as soon as he left Clytie came out of the cupboard and her bare marble back could be seen between the lace curtains until the next time.

I must say that Maria exhibited a rather aggressive sense of social elevation, but as no happiness is unalloyed, so Diana was the innocent cause of some anguish. For no sooner was Maria settled in Clapham than she sent Diana to the very selectest day-school "for the daughters of gentlemen." But, unfortunately, the little Church of England pupils would not play with her because it was rumoured that she was a little dissenter; indeed it was for this theological reason that they pinched her. So Diana came home in tears and explained that she had been pinched because she was a Chapel child, and Maria said to me in bitterness of spirit that she felt she had better leave a church which produced infant martyrs. To save Diana from further martyrdom Maria removed her from school and provided her with a governess. But it rankled.

There is nothing so difficult and expensive as social education and Maria had no one, poor dear, who could officially tell her when she aspired wrong. She longed to be called on by the Established Church,

but the Established Church would not call. Nobody came whom she wanted to dazzle with her new drawing-room. Only the Chapel people called and Maria did not want the Chapel people. It is human nature not to want what you can get, and Maria was very human. Her soul was torn by doubt. She felt with great bitterness that she was in a transition period, and although she had risen to Clapham, she was by no means sure that Clapham was what she wanted.

When Maria made a mistake for which she could not possibly blame Samuel, which, to do her justice, was seldom, then she became quite affectionate to him. So as soon as she was sure that Clapham was a mistake, her mistake unluckily, then she gave Samuel fish with his dinner although they had had soup; for, usually, when she gave him soup she gave him no fish. She also permitted him two glasses of company port, and when he spilt a drop on the table cloth she did not scold, although she saw it. He hurriedly covered it with a bit of bread and looked anxiously at her and wondered what was coming next. I know for I was there. She looked severely at the bread and told him that Clapham was a mistake—she tried to make out that it was his mistake—but all he said, for he had so far succumbed to the soothing influence of port, was that he hoped there wouldn't be another mistake, for he was so tired of moving. He did not dare to say it was her mistake. All he asked was that if they must move again he hoped

she would choose a house without a monkey tree; he was tired to death of monkey trees. Also, until she had made up her mind where she was going to worship, he declined to go to church at all, for she could not expect him perpetually to accommodate his back to the stiffness of strange pews.

Whereupon Maria decided on West Kensington, for in her social innocence Maria was not aware of the awful gulf that separates the real, old Kensington from the upstarts of its own name. She did not know that there is only one Kensington by divine right, a place of aristocratic seclusion and shady squares and Queen Anne houses. Houses with cool halls, cold chintz and Chippendale, and prints of gentlemen in great wigs and ladies in low bodices. A Kensington which shivers at the thought of plush and has, probably, never heard of Tottenham Court Road. And so poor Maria chose a brand new detached villa in West Kensington wherein to aspire, for she had learnt enough not to divide a column with anyone, and as it was brand new Queen Anne it had none of the drawbacks of the old Queen Anne. It was all red brick and gables and it had a perfect eruption of small windows. Maria had always longed for stained glass, and the lights in the front door were stained glass and represented swans, so that quite a sacred glow fell on Samuel's overcoat as it hung on the hat rack.

This time Samuel was spared a monkey-tree for, instead, in the middle of the lawn stood a fountain

representing two pink, cast-iron children under a pink, cast-iron umbrella, over which the water squirted out of the ferrule. Samuel protested against it; he said the way the water squirted wasn't natural. And not only that, but he also rebelled against the name of the villa, "Lohengrin Lodge," and he wanted it changed. But Maria explained to him that the name couldn't be changed because of the swans in the front door.

Maria knew all about Lohengrin; she had heard it sung by a Carl Rosa company, and so she told Samuel the story of Lohengrin and how Elsa had asked him the fatal question. But it left Samuel unmoved; he only remarked that women never did know when to hold their tongues, nor could he see what that had to do with West Kensington. In a way Maria agreed with Samuel. She herself would not have asked Samuel any unpleasant questions the day when they were married in the Wesleyan Chapel in Brixton. Nor could she understand Elsa when she remembered that radiant being in glittering armour to whom Samuel, after she came home by 'bus, had formed a rather disillusioning contrast. Later, of course, married people do ask each other compromising questions, but not the first day. She had herself said things to Samuel which made him disappear for hours at a time, but he was sure to come back.

However, Maria had her way as usual, and "Lohengrin Lodge, West Kensington," figured prominently

on her letter paper. It was not until later that she discovered the social disqualification of "West."

It was about this time that we moved away from Clapham and I had quite lost sight of Maria until I found her again under the hansom cab. But no sooner were we seated on the Empire couch drinking tea than she began to tell me things again just as she used to. So she told me all about West Kensington and how happy she had been there at first. At least not quite happy, nobody is quite happy, because, spiritually, she had been discontented, for although she had given up the Wesleyans she had not ventured into the more fashionable bosom of the Established Church. Then, to add to her trials, she had been very undecided about how to furnish her drawing-room. Maria, although a philosopher, had still to learn that a bad decision is better than indecision. The standard of West Kensington was different from the standard of Clapham. She had been torn, Maria told me, between "New Art" and plush. She was weak in the presence of the chairs of that delightful period which are so picturesque to look at and so hard to sit on. And it was just then, when her soul was quivering with indecision, that she discovered to her consternation that she had laid her carpets in the wrong Kensington.

If in those days she slammed the doors a good deal who can blame her! Everything got on her nerves, especially Samuel, because she could not blame him,

although she certainly tried. Even Diana was a source of worry, for disquieting reports came from her boarding-school that she shirked gymnastics and wrote poetry. Then it was that Maria felt that she must either have a change or die, and so she took Samuel on a second experimental social flight, this time to Bath, to try and recover from West Kensington. And although Samuel wore spats and a serious eye-glass yet it did seem to her, in her nervous condition, that he would never rise above that retail soul of his, nor, to her unspeakable indignation, would he break himself of that little propitiatory cough which he politely strangled behind the bunched up fingers of his left hand. And yet to be just, it was Samuel's cough which gave them their first social rise, for it attracted the attention of Sir Peter Tippett in the Pump Room at Bath.

"Chronic bronchitis, eh? So's mine. D—d bad!" and Sir Peter Tippett who was a retired Indian Judge and spent his latter days nursing his liver, poured a pint of the Elixir of Bath into his patient interior. And as Samuel looked on with his best counter manner, Sir Peter hastened to describe all his symptoms, and finally invited him on his morning constitutional around the Pump Room, the Abbey, up Milsom Street to the Circus and along those lovely winding paths that lead to the heights from which one looks down at Bath in the hollow, with Georgian houses rising in stately terraces. It was then that Sir Peter covered

Samuel with confusion, although it was Maria's fault for so accentuating his deceptive martial appearance.

"Army man?" he asked between wheezes. "Retired, eh?"

Now what was Samuel to do?

"No," he said slowly. "The fact is I—I am in business. I'm the managing director of a company." He had a vision of Maria and he didn't dare to say groceries.

"By Jove, I envy you," said Sir Peter. "That's what I call a soft thing. If you're ever on the look-out for a director, I'm open to an offer," and he laughed wheezily. "Look like a military man; still the eye is not military," and Sir Peter mercifully employed the rest of his breath to climb up the steep heights called "Lansdowne."

It was Maria's privilege to make Lady Tippett's acquaintance. Lady Tippett regulated Sir Peter's diet by her own, and she always disliked what he liked, and she was never hungry. Maria had never met a title before and she was deeply impressed. She fluted at Lady Tippett like a gratified nightingale. But the climax of her joy was reached when the Tippetts consented to dine with them at that pleasant hotel at the top of Milsom Street, on which occasion Sir Peter ate everything that makes a cure a mockery. Lady Tippett said nothing, not having to pay, but she grimly made up her mind to give him afterwards a double dose of something very nasty.

How Maria longed to have Mr. and Mrs. Hicks hear her call them "Sir Peter" and "Lady Tippett," and how often she did manage to call them so. For Maria couldn't forgive Hockin & Hicks, who were expanding out of all proportions.

It was Sir Peter who was the innocent cause of her forsaking West Kensington.

"Where do you live?" Lady Tippett asked in her grudging way. She was not really interested, but you do have to say something to people who give you a good dinner. Her criticism of Maria was that she was too well dressed, too polite and too hospitable, all of which she felt she had no need to be. She herself was always draped in rusty black and she wore a hair brooch with a pearl rim under her loose chin, and only invited people to tea; at least people who didn't count.

"We live in West Kensington, but we are going to move," Maria replied, to her own unbounded astonishment. Samuel was so aghast that he swallowed some champagne the wrong way.

"Come to Bayswater; that's where we live," Sir Peter said genially. He was full of roast duckling and gratitude, and he rather hoped they would come to Bayswater and ask him very often to dinner. He respected his own family cooking, but he did not like it, and he quite ignored Lady Tippett's threatening eye.

Like all great commanders Maria made up her mind at once, and she instantly decided to move to

Bayswater. In vain Samuel protested. He was tired of moving. He had got to like West Kensington enough to make some tentative inquiries about the nearest cemeteries. Now that he had more time, he had also become greatly interested in his own health.

"I don't want to leave West Kensington," he said rebelliously to Maria. "I like Fibbens, he's an excellent doctor and he understands me. Besides I've seen just a place for a tomb, and not too far away to be a bother to the survivors. One has to consider that."

But, as Maria told me later, this time she had him, for she retorted that if they moved now it was only to get rid of the doctor.

"He comes to tea and puts it on the bill," she said with her usual keen insight into motives.

So Samuel could not escape his high destiny which was Bayswater with two columns uplifting the portico. Among other attractions the estate agent offered with this "charming residence" were King Edward and his beautiful queen, who, he pointed out, were obliged to pass it on their way to Windsor. That decided Maria. In her mind's eye she already saw the royal cavalcade sweeping past. She even ventured, in the rapture of her day dreams, to see her sovereign cast a glance towards her balcony where possibly his royal eye might rest on her one fleeting second as she sat there in her best dress, waving a delicate and loyal pocket handkerchief, with Lady

Tippett on one side and Sir Peter on the other. And in her temporary intoxication she wondered if Sir Peter could be induced to wear that great star Lady Tippett had shown her. She even had visions of herself in *The Morning Post*, probably at the foot of the column, but still there.

It was at this time, she confessed to me afterwards, that she did wish she had insisted on Samuel's spelling Smith with a "y."

V

FRIENDSHIP AND FURNITURE

THE very first time I entered Maria's drawing-room in Bayswater after the accident in Regent Street, I saw that a terrible struggle was going on there between Chippendale and the New Art. Maria at once established me as the friend of her childhood to whom she could say things, and so she confessed with a deep sigh, that she didn't know which was the greater trial, Chippendale or the New Art. She felt that she ought to decide between the one or the other, but she didn't know which she liked best. At times she did wish she could find some kind of furniture that combined both. Of course when it came to hardness there was not much to choose between them; they were both dreadfully hard, and when it came to legs she found that Chippendale legs and New Art legs had a great deal in common, for both were either too short or too long, and either way they came as a surprise. She added that she loved tiles, for when she saw tiles she knew it was the New Art, and it is nice to know what you are looking at.

Still she worried a good deal about it, although she had nearly decided to compromise, and for this

reason the front drawing-room was Chippendale, although the couch was Empire, and the back drawing-room was New Art with tiles. Of course it was not for her to criticise but she did wish Chippendale was puffy. Still it was not puffy and it was hard, but at any rate it was nice to know that it was safe, for the young man, from whom she had bought her Chippendale in Tottenham Court Road, had told her that it was the most high-toned thing going. Indeed his conversation had so appealed to her that she had also bought a converted bed-post, which was now fulfilling its destiny as a pedestal to a palm.

"Not a real palm," Maria explained, "but so much better than real because it always looks the same, and it only requires dusting. Samuel says it's dangerous, but it hasn't fallen yet. Don't you love those over-mantels? Yes, Moorish. That sawed out work is so ethereal, isn't it?"

I agreed that it was ethereal. It was full of pigeon holes and shelves and dried things in vases, and Chinese figures that wiggle their heads. Underneath, under glass, was an Ormolu clock that didn't go, and as I looked at the marble mantelpiece I saw that Maria had advanced so far that she could be trusted with plush. Her mind was still communing with the higher furniture.

"I can't imagine," she said thoughtfully, "why everything that is hard is high art. I don't see why soft things shouldn't be high art, but they ain't. I

do know that when furniture is comfortable it is not high art. I can tell it by that."

It was also Maria's opinion that the Middle Ages suffered fearfully from oak. She had studied old oak in Tottenham Court Road and that had made her sorry for the Middle Ages. For if anyone needed something soft to sit on it was certainly the knights. She had examined their armour in Tottenham Court Road and it was terribly hard. By which I discovered that Chippendale had broadened Maria's sympathies.

"But when it comes to furnishing, I must say pictures furnish," and she drew my attention to Samuel "in oils" on one side of the Moorish mantel, and Diana "in oils" on the other, although she admitted that Samuel did not furnish satisfactorily, for he did not harmonise with the furniture; he *would* be taken in a green necktie. But that was so like Samuel—obstinate. But of course he was only a portrait and a portrait is never a picture; it is only the family, and no one expects the family to be pictures.

Samuel I knew was a bad debt and the artist had taken him out in groceries. He had done Diana on the same terms.

"Although Samuel isn't a picture," Maria continued critically, "still I do say he looks natural. Lovely frame, isn't it? And nothing furnishes like frames."

Samuel certainly did look natural. He was painted reading *The Times*, and the artist had imitated the

familiar old English script with painful accuracy, although I couldn't help feeling that it would have been more truthful had Samuel been painted reading *The Daily Mail*. But, as Maria explained, not without reason, it would look much higher toned for Samuel to go down to posterity reading *The Times*, and the model cost only tuppence ha'penny more.

It was Maria's opinion, on the other hand, that Diana in oils was not only a portrait but a picture, and it furnished. The artist had represented Diana as roaming through a primeval forest in a flannel undergarment so very small that it would have been highly improper had Diana been more than two at the time. It had nevertheless greatly shocked Uncle Titcomb when it was exhibited in Hockin & Hicks's window draped in red plush. But Brixton was so pleased that it had quite a renaissance of Art. Mr. Hicks had himself done with Dicky between his knees, and a background of columns, red drapery and tassels, and Mrs. Hicks was painted in her best black satin with the duchess lace front, and the splendid gold necklace with a cameo pendant, which had been Mr. Hicks's wedding present.

"Of course I can show you pictures that really furnish," Maria said, and led the way across the room, "the very best of steel engravings. and just look at those frames," she continued with some condescension.

Maria had quite forgotten that I had seen them

when she lived in Brixton. They were wedding presents, she explained, but she had always felt that Brixton had never been quite far enough advanced for them, so there she had rather hung them in gloom. One represented a Greek sculptor at work on the model of a lady who looked most respectable although she had very little on. Other ladies in similar costumes stood about in attitudes, evidently waiting their turn. The other picture was similar, only the art was different. In Brixton they had been discreetly hidden behind Pampas grass. In fact, Maria confessed, that she didn't know what she would do without Pampas grass and bulrushes. They did so fill up and were so artistic. And when it comes to furnish how they do furnish. "But in Bayswater," Maria added, "it's very different; people are very broad in Bayswater."

So she had not only hung them up boldly, but she had even put a high art piano lamp in front of them. Then I recognized the gulf between Maria and Brixton.

"For say what you will," she continued in her superior way, "these days society says things and looks at things that really—but there!" she concluded with her usual philosophy, "one must do as the best people do even if it isn't quite—quite——"

But of course Maria is a philosopher.

It was, however, in the back drawing-room that I realised how completely Maria had freed herself from the trammels of Brixton: it was all New Art.

There was even a New Art piano across one corner, and over it a St. Cecilia in a New Art copper frame looked towards Heaven for inspiration. In the corresponding corner on the other side stood a harp shrouded in brown holland. The only wrong note was a white milking stool, with plums painted on the seat, which stood beside the harp.

"When Diana grows thinner," Maria replied in answer to my inquiries, "she is to learn it. It is no use yet for it does look so ridiculous to see a stout girl play the harp, and I'm afraid it will be a long time before Diana is thin enough to learn. I bought it at a sale and it's dreadfully out of order, but it's no use having it done up now. Looks nice, doesn't it? I've told Samuel that if ever I have my portrait painted—and why I don't goodness only knows!—I mean to be painted leaning up against it like this," and she raised her eyes to St. Cecilia and rested her elbow on the brown holland form.

"Picturesque, ain't it?" she remarked as she unhooked herself from the harp where her sleeve had caught.

"Of course I should have to have the right kind of dress with angel sleeves, and one must have nice arms," and Maria smiled in a self-conscious way as if she was quite sure about her arms.

"Like it? I can't bear the sound of it—such a tinkle! And why one should be obliged to play it in Heaven I don't know. However, if Diana ever does

get the proper kind of figure it'll do for her. If she doesn't, she'll have to learn the piano. Anyone can play the piano no matter how they look. But nowadays the piano is so common and the pianola does it so much better. I wish Diana liked music; but she doesn't, and it looks so bad for a girl not to like music. Sometimes I think I'll get a gramaphone and make her like it. I'd begin with five minutes at a time, for I don't think she'd stand more. But really I can't help thinking," and Maria shook her head, "that there's too much music in the world. I think I'll have Diana take lessons in art. For art does come in so useful as presents,—to give away, of course. But when it comes to music there's nothing to show for it.

"Yes, the piano's oak; doesn't scratch. And so convenient for photos and vases. That's Uncle Titcomb on the mantel-piece. Hasn't changed a bit, has he? I have to put him up there because he is so sensitive, and he gets so vexed if he doesn't see himself there. I tried to make him look more artistic by putting him in hammered brass, but I've gone back to plush. Still it is very hard," she said in a resigned way, "to make a man with that cut of beard look artistic. Sometimes I'm afraid he nearly spoils the harp!"

"But the piano candles are artistic, aren't they? Don't throw any light on the music? That's no matter, nobody ever plays. What it sounds like? I

don't know; I've never heard it. But as soon as I saw the case I told Samuel that it was just what I wanted. So I've tried to furnish up to it; but it is a worry. When I'm in the front drawing-room I'm all for Chippendale, and when I am in the back I'm all for the New Art. But when Uncle Titcomb says he's sure he'll break his neck over the rugs, I can't help wishing I'd had carpets instead. Still rugs are so much more high art than carpets, aren't they? And Diana, I'm afraid, will have to learn the piano. She does hate it so, and so do we. But nowadays girls are obliged to practise something or other or the young men think they are unwomanly, and I hear that womanly women are going to be all the fashion again. The other kind are so dangerous. So whatever Diana is she shall be womanly, and if she hates the piano she can give it up as soon as she marries. After that I don't care."

VI

MARIA ON CHOOSING A CHURCH

IT was Maria's opinion that it is better to go to no church than to go to the wrong church. This she had learnt from a parlour-maid, a rigid, bilious-looking person of superior height, who came to enquire about Maria's situation. But the parlour-maid inscribed her articles of faith on a post-card and declined to come by first post the very next morning, because, she wrote, she could not think of imperilling her immortal soul by parlour-maiding in the house of a dissenter.

This was in Clapham, and, as it was the first time Maria had aspired to a parlour-maid, she was fearfully upset, and she said with a great deal of bitterness that before she died she did hope to belong to a church that was not open to the adverse criticism of parlour-maids. But it proved, she added, how impossible it is to rise socially if you are a dissenter, for servants are the best judges of society—better even than newspapers. The only dissenters with whom society would mingle are celebrated dissenters and those don't count. For to be celebrated of course covers multitudes of sins. She had noticed how prejudiced even dressmakers are against this form of

theology and how they always show it by giving dissenters a bad fit. To add to their other disabilities dissenters always look so aggressively intelligent and there is nothing so unbecoming as to look too intelligent.

It was Maria's great dread lest Diana should look too intelligent; it was such a drawback for a girl, for it scares young men so. Besides, Diana had already suffered so much. In Clapham the church children had pinched her because she was a chapel child, and they wouldn't play with her. So Maria had made up her mind to leave a church that can be snubbed, for personally she had no longing to be a martyr. As she pointed out, servants don't mind your not going to church, but they do mind your going to the wrong church. In fact it would harm one less socially to be a heathen—there were a good many very nice people who quite boasted of being heathens, and yet people call on them who wouldn't be seen calling on a dissenter. But Maria said that she couldn't possibly be a heathen and she was really tired of being a dissenter. So no wonder that when she reached Bayswater she put her entire trust not only in Lady Tippett but in the Established Church.

As for Samuel he was in a way a theological derelict, for though he had seceded from the Wesleyans he was still without any other harbour of refuge. It was so like Maria to say that the reason she left the

Wesleyans was because she was afraid he would get into the way of wearing an evangelical beard, but it enabled her as usual to put the blame on him. It was only because of her expectations, she declared, that she had resigned herself to the fringe under Uncle Titcomb's chin, but one was enough in any family.

However, Samuel was quite willing to go to the Established Church after he realised its broad spirit. As a Wesleyan his chapel-going had been a rigid and uncompromising function with trying comments in case of absence, but he soon discovered the singularly considerate attitude of the Church towards men; men are not obliged to go to church, at least not in town. Of course, quite properly, female persons—like mothers and sisters—have to go, and so do children; but not fathers. Fathers can go to the club instead. But as in either case they have to wear a top hat and a frock coat, or be for ever accursed, they look equally religious to whichever they go.

So Samuel for the first time realised the Sunday morning comfort of going to a church to which he was not obliged to go. But Maria and Diana rushed off instead, armed with a compact library of prayer-books and hymnals, and Samuel heaved a sigh of relief as the front door slammed behind them. It was Samuel's first respite in all his married life and he owed it to the Church. Whereupon he locked himself in and proceeded to do all those things which he

knew he ought not to do on Sundays, and which he did not wish the parlour-maid to see. For Samuel loved to do fret work, and saw out little weak-kneed corner brackets and boxes, the kind that won't open, or when they are open that won't shut, and all these he laid at the feet of Maria, who received these offerings with tempered gratitude, merely remarking that they only meant so much more to dust. Still Samuel sawed on hopefully, and every Sunday locked himself in, and before he unlocked himself he got down on his knees and brushed up the incriminating saw-dust with a hair-brush because of the parlour-maid. He was not afraid of Divine Providence. But as Maria truly said, how could she ever do any sewing on Sundays if Divine Providence was not more charitable than the servants.

But as Samuel soon found out, Town religion is quite a different thing from Country religion. In the country even fathers have to go to church. Maria knew, for she had made an exhaustive study of both. It seems, according to Maria, that golfers and cyclists never have to go to church, and no one minds, but croquet and tennis must go or be socially ostracised. And week-end visitors must go to church even if they never go again, and people who take summer vicarages have to become at least temporarily religious; and for the benefit of their soul they have to ask the curate to dinner every Sunday. The very last summer Maria had taken a vicarage, and

she had shocked and thrilled the village by letting Samuel stay away from church.

"The baker's wife told me," and Maria described it to me with considerable indignation, "that it was said in the village that Samuel was a foreigner, and foreigners have no souls, at least not English souls, and that's the reason they never go to church. Wasn't it dreadful? And just think of Samuel having no soul and being mistaken for a foreigner!"

I felt for Maria, and I quite saw that after that Samuel had to go to church. But it shows the difference between Country piety and Town piety.

Maria said to me that now that she went to the right church she really felt as if she had been born again. She had taken two seats in Lady Tippett's pew and she also subscribed to the parish magazine. For, as she said, local literature ought to be encouraged, besides it always gives a list of church-recommended char-women. It must be confessed that Lady Tippett let her in for a great deal of flannel charity, and more subscription papers came to Samuel in the name of Sir Peter than Maria quite liked, but by dint of subjecting the lists to an exhaustive scrutiny she discovered the very least the best names give, and it certainly was gratifying to observe how little some of the best names did give. But Maria even resigned herself to charity because of dear Lady Tippett.

On Sundays when she sat in the same pew with

the Tippetts, her soul was filled with exultation. Sir Peter was the Vicar's warden, and so, although he was a man, he always went to church. He was most methodical in his ways. First he deposited his hat under the seat in company with his sacred umbrella, then he rose from his knees and dusted them with great care. Whercupon he blew his nose powerfully with a very big white handkerchief and then became submerged in a large prayer-book which he studied through a pair of black rimmed eye-glasses on the end of his nose. Lady Tippett looked at him occasionally from under her usual rusty Chantilly lace veil. He was still her ideal, and she greatly admired him as he carried about the contribution bag which he did with an air of detached piety and his chest thrown out, exhibiting the rather tight fit of his frock coat; and he had a diplomatic way of gazing into space while the offerings fell into the bag. And what a mercy it was that it was a bag, Maria always said. In her last chapel it had been a wooden box with a long handle which betrayed a too economical offering with a terrible want of tact. As I had heard her ask Samuel for two threepenny bits in exchange for sixpence one Saturday night, I understood her gratitude.

Lady Tippett's contribution used to fall in with a heavy thud that impressed Maria as representing at least half a crown, but one Sunday it slipped and rolled to Diana's feet, and the thoughtless child

picked it up and offered it to Lady Tippett, who dis-owned her own offering with a cold stare. It was a penny.

"Why, my dear child," Maria interposed with heroic presence of mind, "that's mine," and she put it in her pocket with a smile adapted to the sanctuary. Lady Tippett ostentatiously contributed a sixpence, and decided during the hymn, that possibly it was Maria's penny after all.

Another difference between Church and Chapel, Maria said, was expression. She was afraid Diana was a born dissenter, for she would look pleased if she was pleased, instead of having no expression whatsoever. It was such a lesson for her, said Maria, to go to church and watch the faces. She acknowledged with a good deal of humility, that at first she herself had smiled too much and looked too friendly. But she did hope that she knew better now. "You don't know how easy it comes to me now to look blank," she said with pride, "I am sure I do it well."

I said she did, and so she does.

"Still, the world is a hard place," and Maria sighed deeply, "when one's gone to the wrong church and lived in the wrong place. And even Church isn't all one expects. I'm always being asked to subscribe to things and to meet the wrong people. There are the Fauntleroy-Joneses. They live in Park Lane," Maria said in a hushed way. "And I'm simply dying to know Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. Lady Tippett al-

ways goes out of church with her, and I stand as near as I possibly can. But do you think she has ever introduced me? Never. Sometimes I get so discouraged and think what is the use of ever going to church? Then there is Lord McIntosh, a dear old peer with an ear trumpet. He sits in the front pew and comes in wrong with the responses. I've tried for months to get introduced to him. I've made up my mind," Maria said solemnly, "that if ever I do know him I shall give him a dinner, and then I mean to have a butler. But of course it's no use having a butler unless he has something to announce. But it is very slow work," and Maria shook her head, "I've been there a whole year and I have got no farther than church teas and flannel petticoats. And yet I do hope," and she spoke as one having a lofty aim, "and yet I do hope I shall live to know the very best people and keep a butler."

VII

MARIA ON MARRIAGE

WE were having tea in the drawing-room and Diana sat snuggled up to me on the Empire couch. Maria behind the tea tray was submerged in *The Morning Post*. Diana prodded me cautiously with her healthy young elbow.

"Do pass the bread and butter, ducky, I'm so awfully hungry," she whispered with a wary eye on Maria. I put out a tentative hand towards the plate.

"No!" and Maria swooped down upon us and we both tried to look blameless. But I never was so surprised; I thought she was quite absorbed by the fashionable intelligence.

"Not another slice!" said Maria, and she removed the bread and butter, and Diana followed it with gloomy eyes.

"You selfish thing," Maria cried indignantly, "always thinking of yourself! How do you suppose I feel to have an only child for whom I have to buy out sizes? It's most awfully mortifying."

"I don't care!" Diana said resentfully. "You might just as well let me eat bread and butter; nothing will ever make me thin! The more gymnastics I

do the stouter I get, and I do hate 'em so! And I'm always hungry. Sometimes I wish," and Diana flung a glance of defiance at her mother, "I had a mother who didn't care."

"What?" said Maria, and she took such a long breath that we both held ours. "You want another mother? Oh, you wicked, wicked girl! And this is the reward for all I've done for you, for all the nights I can't sleep thinking of your clothes and wondering what I can do to make you look thin? And you want another mother? You unfeeling child! You only want another mother so that you can eat anything you choose. And then how you will look! But I dare say you'll have another mother before long, for I'm quite sure you'll worry me to death, and it will be just like your father to marry again—at once. But I—I know you'll think of me then, and wish you hadn't. There! Don't try to kiss me! And if you really are sorry go right upstairs and do your gymnastics. But it does break my heart to think that your bread and butter is so much more to you than your mother. Kiss you? You stupid child! Now go along."

I caught the curve of Diana's cheek as she shut herself out and I was glad to see that she had recovered her spirits.

We watched the door close on her and then Maria raised her eyes to the centre stucco ornament of the ceiling as if seeking for comfort there.

"Did you ever see such a back?" she groaned.

She really did groan, such was her anguish.

"I should know Diana's back anywhere," I admitted, and I wondered why Maria stared so resentfully at me. Of course I should know Diana's back anywhere, it is much more characteristic than her features, which are only struggling into being as yet. Diana is like a lottery ticket; nobody knows what will come out.

"I think you are very cruel," Maria exclaimed most unreasonably, and she was so out of temper that she asked me not to feed Holdall in the drawing-room. For I was sharing my bread and butter with her Scotch terrier, a worldly, engaging beast who had taught himself to sit up and beg, with such success that he spent most of his existence on his hind legs.

"You know that Diana's been a trial to me ever since she was baptised—and I never get any comfort from you. There, go away, Holdall, you're a bad, bold dog." For Holdall had taken advantage of her temporary anguish to sniff too closely at the bread and butter. So he was expelled and he wailed on the landing.

"She's been my one thought ever since she was born, and I tried to do my very best for her, and so I called her Diana. I expected at least that she would be thin; but to call her Diana and have her grow stouter and stouter. Isn't it awful!"

I nodded sympathy and helped myself to a sandwich.

"It isn't often that I am wrong, but sometimes I do wish I'd done what Samuel asked me to, and called her after his Aunt Martha," Maria confessed with heroic self-abasement. "He said at the time that one expects so much less from a Martha than a Diana. Perhaps he was right. You don't know how often I have to say to her, 'For goodness' sake, do turn your toes out, Diana!' And it wouldn't sound half so bad if her name was Martha, would it? But there, how is one to know in the beginning what they're going to look like?" Maria said in great depression.

"I'm sure," she added thoughtfully, pouring more water in the tea-pot than was strictly necessary, "I'm sure I should die of mortification if she didn't marry. It would be so awful always to have her name on my visiting card and to see her front teeth begin to be filled with gold. I wake up in the middle of the night and can't sleep for thinking how unbecoming all her clothes are. I've looked at her so much that I haven't any idea how she looks, and Samuel lies there sound asleep and never stirs. Talk of a father's love and a mother's! Much a father cares! You know that expensive brown dress of hers with embroidered tulips in front? I call it a poetic dress," Maria said with feeling, "but she always says she looks like an embroidered pin-cushion in it, and I don't know but

what she does. Still what am I to do? Do you know what I wish?" and Maria spoke with defiance mingled with doubt. "I wish to goodness she were a Gaiety girl, then I should at least be sure that she'd get married."

For a moment I held my breath at Maria's heroic audacity. What would Lady Tippett have said?

"For you know," and Maria spoke solemnly, "that they are the only girls who have any chances, at least any good chances."

I recognised the truth of Maria's lament, but I saw the impossibility of competing with those lovely beings. As Maria pointed out it was useless for Diana to take to the serious drama, as the aristocracy never marries into the serious drama, at least not now. It only marries long silk stockings, short frilly petticoats, and that enchanting picture post-card smile.

But as I explained to her, it is natural enough for a man to look forward with infinite longing to call those lovely silk stockings, the frilly petticoats and the smile his own, and to have them preside for ever over his coffee-pot.

I described to Maria, who was extremely depressed, his rapture when, in the middle of breakfast, a meal which often drags in ordinary households, the lovely being leaps from her kipper to her white satin shoes with Louis XV heels—a monarch responsible for so much that is charming—and dances that enchanting

pas seul—the butler and footman meanwhile looking on but not moving an eye-lash—so well trained!—with which she had enthralled him as he sat in the stalls in a collar that all but choked him, sucking the knob of the last things in canes. I think I convinced Maria that it was only to be expected that he should hasten to offer her his stately name and an even division of his debts, and that one day he should lead her blushing to a registry office.

“I wonder,” Maria asked with gloomy sarcasm, “if she will always smile at him as she does on the picture post-card?”

“Of course she will,” I replied warmly, “for it’s part of her trousseau. She will be expected to throw perpetual kisses at him across the bacon and eggs, and to sing to him those killing songs in a tin voice and a cockney accent which always brought down the house. He will expect her to smile on him for ever with that radiant ‘Odol’ smile. Perhaps she will. It’s to be sincerely hoped she will, for,” as I pointed out to her, “even the most expressionless aristocrat in the stalls has his day dreams behind his monocle.”

“For goodness’ sake, do let that dog in!” and Maria raised herself from an irritable contemplation of the superior advantages of the Gaiety Theatre as a matrimonial agency, “I can’t hear myself think!”

For Holdall was keeping up a continuous moan outside. Invited to enter he immediately came close

to the tea table and begged. Whereupon, being weak, I fed him with bun, and Maria moaned instead.

"I only wish I could convince Diana," she cried, rousing herself, "what a drawback it is to a girl to look too intelligent. It makes her so unpopular with the young men. As I always tell her she musn't look intelligent until after she's married. But in a way she is so frivolous; she doesn't remember. Men are so afraid of intelligent girls and that is the reason I suppose that the women who want to vote are mostly unmarried or widows. I dare say," and Maria propounded this as an unanswerable theological argument, "that's the way the world will end. All the women will vote and then the men will be afraid to marry them, and so by and by that will be the end of it. It's bad enough as it is," and she spoke with a gloomy eye on the past, "to make them propose. But Diana is just like her father and I dare say she'll never marry. Not too intelligent? Do you really mean to say you don't think she looks too intelligent? You dear thing; it's such a relief," and Maria seemed very grateful. "You see the poor child has so much to put up with; she looks so like poor mother, and you know we always wondered why poor father married poor mother. He was so much of a gentleman, and so wasted on poor mother, though she did like to see him well dressed. But she was like Diana and showed her feelings—so middle-class. And then Diana always likes the wrong people. People who

never give parties and are so glad to call. How often I have told her that that isn't the way to get on in the world. One should ask people to call who don't want to, and one should always call on the people who don't care whether one comes or not. That's the way to make real friends. But Diana has no social instinct, though it's painful to say so," and Maria produced a gorgeous work bag in which she kept her company charity work, and out of which she produced a very tight little flannel petticoat.

"It's just possible that Lady Tippett may call and this is for her special mission. I'd like her to see how much I am interested, for I do want her to ask me to tea to meet the colonial bishop. Of course he isn't a real English bishop, still it's something to begin with."

"But," I said dubiously, "it will only fit such a very small heathen that it can't require any petticoat at all."

"That just shows what a practical charity it is," Maria retorted warmly, "for the Bishop told us that when they can't be used as petticoats they are most useful for making butter. The heathens tie up one end, pour in the milk, then tie up the other and shake till the butter comes. It does make me feel so much better when I'm doing useful work like this, and think of the poor heathen far away who will be obliged to learn how to wear petticoats if he wants to be saved. That is what we call progress," she explained

with unnecessary condescension, "and progress is always painful. Of course," and she descended from her high moral altitude, "you must keep what I told you about the Gaiety an awful secret. I wouldn't have Lady Tippett know for worlds; she'd be so shocked. And wouldn't you suppose Diana would be grateful to me for worrying so about her, and making all these horrid things and all because of her?" and Maria held out her little petticoat dramatically. "Not at all. I overheard her say to her father that she'd like to see someone send her a flannel petticoat she didn't want. And just as I came in she said 'Poor Dad,' as if he had any bother about her. Why, I nearly cry every time I look at her waist, only she hasn't any waist. But there, I mustn't lose courage! I've got to get her thin in three years, for then she'll be out. It's dreadful to think of her being 'out,' for I'm sure I don't know what she'll do when she is out. But I do know I should die happy," and Maria raised her eyes to the ceiling as if she saw a vision, "if I could ever see the announcement in *The Morning Post* that a marriage had been arranged between Diana and anything with a title."

I was so touched by Maria's aspirations that Hold-all took the opportunity to swallow a whole bun before I had recovered myself. And he was still struggling with it when he sat up again and begged for more.

VIII

MARIA ON POETRY

MARIA hung over the bannisters and called to me to come up to Diana's room. Maria's voice was full of drama. I was rather surprised as I knew Diana was out, for it was her day for the gymnastics she so hated. I found Maria in possession, and she was on a tour of conscientious inspection. The familiar, disorderly little room in which Diana and I held high converse had delivered up all its secrets, and it seemed to have been struck by an awful tornado of order.

Maria stood in the middle with flushed cheeks, a look of despair and a duster. She had penetrated into Diana's holiest of holies and what Diana had hoarded as sacred, Maria confiscated as "clutter." "Dirty clutter," she added, and then she threw on the battered old table a dog-eared copy-book which she had ruthlessly torn from its constant companion in the upper drawer, Diana's hair brush.

The old copy-book looked forlornly at me from the table; it was an old friend of mine and the confidant of Diana's aspirations and emotions, and out of it Diana used to read me samples of her own poetry

which were never intended for Maria's eye, and I could not but feel that Maria's eye would act on them like a blight.

For the first time the widowed hair brush lay by itself in the upper drawer and all poor Diana's disorders and soul secrets lay exposed to a cold scrutiny. A withered rose tied with a bit of blue ribbon entangled in a sticky cough drop, fell, as the first victim, into the paper-basket.

"Isn't it too dreadful?" and Maria sighed. Language failed her.

"She seems to love dust. What will become of her?"

"She'll outgrow it," I said soothingly. "Dust and disorder are natural to all young things. Don't you remember at school, Maria, you used to go to bed in your boots, so as to save putting them on in the morning?"

"I didn't!" Maria retorted.

"You did," I said; and she did. We looked at each other. But it is surprising how soon parents forget. One would think by the way they act that parents are born ready made parents, and flawless.

"And now see what you are," I urged admiringly, as Maria sat down and fluttered the leaves of the old copy-book.

"Anyhow, I never wasted any time doing this," she said scornfully. "Poetry! A child of mine write poetry! Well, I never did! And doesn't it look smudgy? Just what I should expect of Diana's poetry."

And indeed Diana's inspirations required a very soft pencil.

Still Maria prided herself on being just. And she would even be just with poetry although she disapproved of it.

"I dare say there's no harm in writing poetry," she admitted as she turned over the dingy leaves, "if one has nothing else to do, or if one's married. I can't imagine from whom she takes it; Samuel don't write poetry, and I wouldn't if I could. Now just hear this: 'Unrequited Love.' At her age, too, and with such an appetite. Diana and unrequited love. Isn't it awful! And here's a 'Sea Tragedy.' Sea tragedy, indeed. And all she knows about the sea was when we took her to Dieppe and she was so dreadfully seasick. And now she writes poetry about it. I must say they warned me at school. Poetry!" she cried with infinite disdain. "Why people ever write poetry I can't imagine. I always wonder who reads it; I wouldn't for worlds. But, to be sure, I've been told that people make loads of money writing it. Isn't it queer? For I call it silly stuff, I do really," and Maria shook her head.

"Now I just want you to tell me, did you ever hear anybody talk poetry? I never did—that is, only once," and she paused conscientiously, "when I was taken over a lunatic asylum by the wife of a doctor who lived there. She pointed out a little old woman who thought she was Bacon—I mean of

course the man who thought he wrote Shakespeare," Maria explained with some forbearance, as I looked puzzled, "and she recited very nice poetry to us, quite as good as Shakespeare, I thought," she added critically; "she said a good deal in poetry about the porridge she had for breakfast always being burnt, and I couldn't help thinking how much better it would have sounded in prose, poor thing. And I must say even when I hear Shakespeare he doesn't sound natural, and I can't really say I like him unless he is covered by scenery. But what I do feel is he's so respectable—nearly as respectable as the Bible. That is the reason I always take Diana to Shakespeare; he is so safe. One always knows what he's going to say. And then, too, one is always so glad when he's over, and quite ready to go home, and one never really cares if they get each other at the end or not, and that makes it so nice about one's wraps and things, for one can begin to put them on before the end. But I can't make Samuel go to Shakespeare. He got him as a prize at school and he used to have to read him to his father of an evening when he was sleepy, that is when Samuel was sleepy, and he's hated him ever since. Still I can't imagine what schools and children would do without Shakespeare, can you?"

"Then there is Milton," and Maria warmed to her subject. "I used to have Milton in my grammar lessons, and we had to parse him. Gracious, how we

did loathe him! And as if that was not bad enough, Aunt Martha gave him to us as a wedding present when she knew perfectly well that I wanted a sugar bowl. But there! people are so inconsiderate. You don't wonder that I wouldn't name Diana after her, do you? But isn't it dreadful to think that Diana's taken to writing poetry at her age? But she shan't publish a thing till there isn't a single chance left of her getting married. Then I don't care what happens: she can write poetry or 'slum' or 'vote' or anything else, for I suppose by that time she'll have to do something to take up her time.

"Still when one sees how popular Shakespeare and Milton and Wordsworth are—we never did think much of Byron; and the days I used to spend trying to find the things in him I oughtn't to read!—and how one finds them in every family, even if nobody reads them, perhaps by that time Diana might just as well publish as not, and I dare say she'll make a lot of money. You just think how much money is made out of poetry every year," and Maria looked steadily at me. "There isn't a Christmas that I don't get a book of poetry I don't want. And now they've such a way of tying them up that they quite deceive you, and you think it's something interesting. Though I must say I do lose patience," she added with some warmth, "when people write inside and one can't give it away again."

"But don't people who write have an easy time? Now I feel positive that the very biggest kind of a novel wouldn't cost more than five shillings for paper and possibly tuppence for ink, and yet I've heard that some people who write novels make more than Smith Limited with shops all over London, and goodness knows how much they pay in rent. I call that unfair. And when it comes to poetry I don't suppose the paper Shakespeare used cost fivepence, including a pencil—Diana always writes with pencil—and what they ask for one copy when I want to buy one, only I never do, is just wicked!"

"And now that times are so bad and so many people are out of work, I do wonder why more don't go in for writing poetry as a business; they don't have to work, real work I mean, and they don't have to learn anything, or keep an office. They don't have to take a 'bus and go somewhere every morning, and if they don't want to they needn't get up. All the same they are written about in *The Morning Post* just as if they were somebody, and the smartest kind of people invite them to dinner, and nobody cares whether they go to church or not. I really can't understand it," and Maria sighed as if the problem was too deep for her, "and sometimes I think if Diana insists on writing poetry after she is too old to get married she might do worse. But whatever she does," Maria concluded impressively, "I hope she will always write poetry like a lady."

IX

THE YOUNG DIANA

DIANA lured me up to her bed-room to read me bits of her own immortal works. She asked me modestly if I didn't think it was a good deal like Tennyson.

"Why don't you write cheerful things, Diana?" I suggested. Diana was very sensitive.

"You wouldn't write cheerful things," she exclaimed, "if you were always hungry. I never get enough to eat. Sometimes I'm just desperate," the young martyr cried resentfully. "And do you know what she drives me to?" and she turned on me in gloomy retrospect, "buns!" I go out and make it up in buns. But don't you dare to tell. I'd get more but father only allows me sixpence a week pocket-money and one can't do much on sixpence a week, can one?"

I admitted the limitations of sixpence a week, and as I looked at Diana critically I felt if she could only subdue her cheeks and give her eyes a chance there was hope for the future.

"I don't believe mother ever was young or hungry," Diana said moodily; "and isn't it funny how soon mothers forget! Do you know what I wish? I wish



THE PLAID SHAWL



one could be born a widow; the kind that knows it's becoming and don't care."

Diana was wrapped in a hideous little red and green plaid shawl which she always wore when she had a cold or was in disgrace, or wrote poetry or did anything else that was objectionable.

Diana's room was the mausoleum of all Maria's shattered ideals. Here all she had ever revered, until she knew better, had taken refuge with Diana. Diana was nothing if not faithful. When I gently criticised the inelegance of the red and green plaid, she said that it had once been a present from Mrs. Hicks. "And I love it just as much now as I did then," she added defiantly, "and I love Mrs. Hicks and I want to see her again, and I mean to! So there! And Dicky Hicks, too. Such a nice boy, and do you know," and she blushed as she made this artless confession, "he once knocked down a much bigger boy who called me 'fatty.' He was a real hero," said Diana, "though he was only twelve."

"Is it a cold or poetry, or what, Diana?" I asked, as I sat down on an aged sofa whose springs bulged below.

"It's a cold," and Diana obliged me with a sample sniff, "and it's mother. Mother does bother me so, she does really. And she don't believe in poetry and she won't listen to a word. Father's always ready, but he falls asleep in the middle. Mother says girls who are popular and get married never write poetry

and she hopes I'll give it up in time, for she says she'd die of mortification if I didn't marry. I can't help it if she does; I can't make a young man marry me if he don't want to! Though I feel sure," and Diana's gloom was quite out of harmony with her features, "when mother made up her mind to marry father, he just had to. I always wondered why he did. But I'd rather be a widow than anything else except a poet.

"And sometimes I wonder there isn't a place like Whiteley's where one could hire a young man to get engaged to by the week. Only to keep mothers quiet! I'm sure I never want to get married," Diana said disdainfully, "but if ever I do it's going to be something I like and not what mother likes. When mother says 'Samuel!' then I wonder if there's a Samuel waiting for me somewhere, who's got to do just as I tell him? How I'd hate him! But now I'm writing on 'Boadicea.' But please don't tell mother. She does so take away my inspiration. Just when I'm feeling most inspired she comes upstairs and says I'm to hem bed-sheets. Sometimes she worries me so much that I feel I shall have to do something! Always bothering about gymnastics and sewing, and making calls," and Diana looked unutterable misery. "How I hate making calls. The only call I'd like to make is on the Hickses and mother won't hear of it. Dicky Hicks was the only boy who ever liked me and he mightn't now that I'm fifteen. I cried all day long

when I was fifteen, I felt so old! And mother gave me an umbrella as a birthday present. Such a horrid present when one's as old as that. It's bad enough to be fifteen and stout. Mother always talks as if I made myself stout on purpose! I wish she knew what a trial it is.

"I've tried falling in love to see if that would make a difference, but it doesn't. 'Tisn't as if I didn't know. Last year at school most of the big girls were in love. It's as common as bread and butter! Some were in love with the piano teacher, but most with the singing master, so it left out the French master, and nobody wanted to be in love with him. So I said I'd be. And most of the girls wore lockets and showed me what was inside if I'd promise not to tell. And I never did till now, but now," and Diana leaned across the battered old school-room table, "now I will tell; I'm as sure as sure it was hair from the head of the head-mistress's brown spaniel, for I heard her say to the writing teacher that she was going to rub Togo—his name was Togo—with cocoanut oil for he was losing his fur in such a queer way. And, d'you know, when father sent me a locket on my birthday, the mean things dared me to ask the French master for a bit of his hair," and Diana paused, and I respected the dramatic character of the pause.

"Dare me," and Diana impaired the dramatic situation by giggling, "and I'll do anything. So I

asked him, but I thought he'd never understand, and there I stood first on one foot and then on the other till he said at last, 'My dear young mees, I feel vere proud. But I cannot gif you a bit, for it's a peety to spoil ze whole. I gif you ze whole,' and he took off all his lovely brown hair and held it out to me—it was a wig—and then I ran! But I didn't tell the girls. I thought I'd be even with them. So I showed them some hair in my locket, and it wasn't Togo's hair neither. It was some of my own. But wouldn't you rather wear your own than a Togo's? But dare me," and Diana relapsed into misanthropy, "and I'd do anything!"

It was a week after this that Diana really did something. I met Samuel under the hat-rack, over which hangs the framed coat of arms of the Smiths. He was greatly disturbed and he said he was in a way thankful that he had a funeral to go to or he didn't know what he should do. As for Maria she was so angry that she had given up a whole dreadful day to having his study cleaned. Samuel keeps all his boots in his study. And as for Diana she was upstairs in solitary confinement, and he would be glad if I would go up and see her. Then he slammed himself out.

Diana opened the door just a crack and I caught sight of the red and green plaid, two swollen eyes and a rasped red nose.

"O, it's you? Come in," and Diana mopped her

eyes with a handkerchief soppy with tears. "I told you I'd do it, but, somehow, it's gone wrong. Mother says people'll never forget it, and she'd rather die than not. But I'm sure she won't want to die before she's tried on her new dress. It's only just come home."

"But what have you done?" I asked, as we sat hand in hand on the bulgy sofa.

"It was only yesterday, but it seems ages ago," and Diana sobbed, "I was so happy. Holdall and I were walking in Kensington Gardens. I was thinking of 'Boadicea,' and Holdall was chasing the ducks, and I was wondering if some day they'd put me on a monument like Prince Albert, only I do hope I shan't be so shiny. And just then I saw Sir Peter walking round Prince Albert, getting up an appetite for lunch. He does it fifteen times every day and then goes home to curry. O, dear me," and Diana heaved a tragic sigh, "I wish I hadn't seen him. And if he only didn't pretend to understand when he doesn't! I was just thinking how happy I should be if I could write poetry for ever, and be engaged, so that mother wouldn't worry me about bread and butter and gymnastics. Then it came to me like a flash as Holdall and I walked round Prince Albert with Sir Peter, and just as we got behind Prince Albert's back, Sir Peter saw that I had something on my mind.

"'What can I do for you, little girl?' he asked, and

stood still, although he said it interrupts the functions of digestion. Then I asked if he would mind my saying that I was engaged to marry him as soon as Lady Tippett died? I was sure she wouldn't mind; she's so old, and I knew mother'd like it.

"‘Certainly, certainly,’ he said, and he looked so pleased I thought he understood, and his eyes bulged out just like a lobster’s, and then he said he’d have to go, for it was nearly one o’clock and he hadn’t quite done Prince Albert.

“But the unlucky thing was that yesterday afternoon the Pontifex girl called with her mother. You know Mrs. Pontifex? She looks just like a great, fat fluthery old hen I once had, and she kept calling the Pontifex girl ‘darling’ and ‘dearie,’ and the Pontifex girl sat there looking silly and poking her sunshade into the carpet. I hope she’ll remember the pattern! And after tea had come up Mrs. Pontifex said to mother, with a dreadful pride, that she’d an awful secret to tell her. She was only telling it to a few,” and Diana tried to draw her unformed nose into the formidable feature of Mrs. Pontifex.

“Darling here is just engaged to Mr. Titsey. So sweetly suitable,’ she said.

“Now the Pontifex girl’s twenty if she’s a day, and there was no reason why mother should become so kind of stony and white behind the muffins. She turned them quite cold. And Mrs. Pontifex told us all about young Mr. Titsey, who was one of twins,

although one had died, but Mr. Titsey was the twin who hadn't died. How good his prospects were and how he adored the Pontifex girl, and how he adored her, Mrs. Pontifex, though I'm sure I don't know why," said Diana. "And how much harder it is in these days to marry off girls, young men being so scarce, and mostly hating the comforts of home. But she hoped mother'd have no trouble about me when the time came. And mother shook her head awfully at me as if she were thinking, 'O, you dreadful disappointment!'

"And there sat the Pontifex girl blinking her white eyelashes and being so lovely and thin, and mother was smiling over the kettle a smile that was agony. So I decided at once to give her a pleasant surprise and make her quite happy again. 'I meant so well,'" and Diana mopped her eyes.

"So I said, 'Please don't worry about me, Mrs. Pontifex. Although I certainly am young I'm already nicely provided for. I've also just become engaged. I quite forgot to tell mother about it.'

"I wish you could have seen mother! Not a bit of gratitude; only just white and blue with splashes of green.

"'Diana!' that was all she said, but she trembled so that even the kettle shook.

"It's quite true, mother. Only I forgot to tell you. I'm engaged to marry Sir Peter Tippett as soon as Lady Tippett dies. He said I might.

"I shall never try to please mother again," and Diana wept afresh. "And I wish you'd seen the Pontifexes. They looked so disappointed until they heard the name, and then how they laughed, though I didn't see anything to laugh at. And Mrs. Pontifex said I was a dear, original child, and what a comfort that was nowadays when everybody was alike.

"But I wish you could have seen mother as soon as they had gone. She called me all sorts of things and said that now she gave it up! Then she told me to go right upstairs, and said she didn't know if she could ever bear to see me again. And she wouldn't listen when I told her that I only meant it for a pleasant surprise. She tore up and down the room and nearly knocked down the palm, and the harp rocked, and she kept saying how the Pontifexes would talk, and they'd be sure to go straight away to Lady Tippett and tell her, and what would Lady Tippett say! And because of me she had lost her very dearest friend, for Lady Tippett would be sure to believe the worst. But how can Lady Tippett be her dearest friend if you are?" and Diana turned a gloomy eye on me. "Why, the very last week I heard her say she did hope she'd live long enough to snub her. It's so hard to know just what parents mean, especially if they mostly say what they don't mean," and Diana shed a few more tears.

"But now I've made up my mind never to get

engaged again, but just to go on writing poetry for ever. And I do hope I shall live to die young, for poets mostly do. Father'll be sorry even if mother isn't. Are you going down?" and a swollen eye emerged from behind the mop.

"I wonder if you would mind asking cook to send me up a slice of cold apple-tart? Brown, please. I can't bear it underdone. But I'm afraid my heart's broken. But poets mostly have broken hearts, don't they? So I don't mind."

I ordered the apple-tart for the young sufferer and then I went away, and as I crossed Bayswater Road to the Kensington Gardens gate with the little green ginger-beer stall on one side, and the woman with the toy balloons on the other, I had a melancholy conviction that poor Diana was inclined to be original, and I was very sorry for Maria. It's so hard to marry off an original girl.

And indeed the very next time I met Maria she was full of her troubles, and, as she truly observes, troubles are the most expensive things going. I met her in the tube on my way to Oxford Circus. Maria sat down next to a man who was smoking a pipe. "Oblige me by not smoking," she said severely.

"Why not?" and he took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at her.

"I don't like it."

"Then perhaps you'd better go where you belong: this is a smoking car."

We filed into the next carriage, but it does make Maria so cross to be in the wrong.

"You don't know what I've suffered from Lady Tippett," she exclaimed tragically, "and it just makes me sick to think what it's cost!" and she took a long, painful breath.

The train shook and swung and clattered through the tunnels.

"I can't begin to tell you all before Oxford Circus! She heard it at once from the Pontifexes, and what they must have told her, goodness knows! The next Sunday she hardly looked at me in church, and she quite looked through Diana though the poor child stepped on both her feet. And she had an at-home and never invited me! When I heard of that I nearly died. And all because of that wicked child. But I know what the matter is; she's jealous! That's what's the matter. She thinks he's so fascinating. Ever hear of anything so absurd! 'Bond Street,' and I haven't even begun to tell you! It's so hard to collect one's thoughts in the tube. It joggles so! As for living in Bayswater and having Lady Tippett cut me, I simply can't and won't. I thought it all over during the sermon, and I made up my mind I wouldn't give her up. Not for worlds. So as we left church I asked if I might call. Such eyes! Ice with fire behind, and a smile that had turned sour. But I went. She had on her black alpaca with the dull bugles. She was knitting a stocking and kept dropping stitches, she shook so.

"I hadn't the remotest idea what I was going to say—O, dear me, if it isn't Oxford Circus already! No, you mustn't go! I want you to hear the rest. Lovely posters. So educating—like the Academy, only funnier. My dear, she didn't help me with a single word, and there I sat and she sat, and she kept dropping stitches. She didn't send for tea, nor nothing, and I felt I'd lost my best friend—of course you are the friend of my childhood and that's quite different!—I could have cried, for she hasn't yet introduced me to Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. I was shaking all over. And I knew she was aching for me to go. It was my last chance to know the best people in Bayswater and so I did it," and by the way Maria breathed I felt sure that whatever she had done it must have been awful.

"To begin with," Maria continued with the calmness of despair, "I told the most dreadful lie; but I had to do it, so I don't care. It was telling Samuel afterwards that was so horrid. If you only knew what it's cost! Dear me, I do declare if it isn't Tottenham Court Road already! Where I bought my Chippendale. The young man said it was antique. But I hope not, because of the wormholes. What I told her was that Samuel wanted Sir Peter to become a director of Smith Limited. That he said Sir Peter's name would be a tower of strength. There!"

I could only stare at Maria. As she truly said, she'd done it!

"What did she say?" I asked after I had found my voice.

"She asked if it paid. That's all. And I had to make up my mind at once. I couldn't go back. Five guineas each time, I told her, for I know what they get. It was I who shook then. She stopped knitting and looked at me hard, and do you know what she said? That it must be understood he wasn't to sell anything on commission. For even peers, she said, couldn't sell on commission and be popular. And it was dreadful nowadays how peers come to tea and before you know it they've sold you bad wine and shares and things. But if all he had to do was to take up a few shares and sit at a table for two hours a month and get five guineas, she thought she could persuade him to do it.

"Mind, five guineas a time," she kept repeating. Then she rang for tea and said Diana was only a child, but she was afraid she was an original child, and nothing could be worse, and she was very sorry indeed for me. She was thankful to say that Miss Tippett had never been original. Nice girls never are. Then I went home and told Samuel."

Here we shot into the British Museum Station, and from Maria's expression I was convinced that the interview with Samuel had been stormy, and the storm for once had not all been on her side. At any rate the mere recollection of it so upset her that she offered the lift man her visiting-card instead of the

ticket. In her anguish she had put it in her card-case.

"That's been tried on before, but it won't do," and he refused it stolidly; whereupon she discovered her mistake and gave up her ticket.

"You don't really think that I meant to cheat the tube out of tuppence?" she asked loftily.

"Step along, lodies," was all he vouchsafed, and we shot up. There's no chance to argue in a lift; you're there before you've begun.

"Would you suppose that a person could be so near the British Museum every day and yet have such bad manners?" Maria exclaimed as she swept past the lift man. But the lift man only looked blankly over her head into Holborn.

"However," said Maria as we turned into Southampton Row, "she's invited me to her party, and next week I'm going there to meet Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. And she's half promised me Lord McIntosh. So that's something! Still," and she sighed deeply, "it's been a great trial and it comes very dear. Good-bye! I'm making calls. 'Bus calls."

I have such an innate belief in Maria that as I meditated on her extravagant diplomacy I felt quite sure that sooner or later she would annex the whole of Lady Tippett's visiting list.

X

MARIA ON MEMORY

MARIA once said to me with her usual wisdom that now that duchesses, in these socialistic days, go about in 'buses and mingle with the middle classes, and indeed class distinction has quite ceased, it is just as well to be polite to everybody, for, really, you never can tell.

The fact is Maria once met a princess, and she refers to it much oftener than is strictly necessary. Of course it wasn't a real British princess, she couldn't expect that yet, but a foreign one, and although it sounds the same it isn't the same thing at all; but as long as people can't go about with the *Almanach de Gotha* in their pockets, even a foreign princess comes in for a good deal of innocent and mistaken reverence. Indeed Maria has been hoping to rehearse a court curtsey on her princess in anticipation of meeting the real royal thing; she has even confessed to me that she wished she could meet an unimportant queen just for practice, so as to get over being nervous. Maria's princess is so very democratic that she is usually to be met in a 'bus, therefore when I arrived at Maria's late one afternoon at twilight I

thought for a moment that it was Maria's princess who had dropped in to tea. She was short and stout, and three black ostrich plumes surmounted a black bonnet, and in the dim light I saw she wore a garment called a dolman, visibly constructed from what had been a camel's hair shawl with a red centre. She held a cup of tea in a hand covered by a rather large lavender kid glove, and a piece of buttered toast in the other. It is needless to say that it was not the princess, for Maria behind the tea-kettle was enveloped in a precipitate of frost. But Diana sat close to the visitor and patted the camel's hair in an excess of joy.

Maria seemed relieved when I came in.

"O, it's only you!" she said with the rudeness of friendship, and added with chilly brevity, "here is Mrs. Hicks."

We were both delighted to see each other again, and Mrs. Hicks put her buttered toast carefully in her saucer and shook my hand with more emphasis than customary in the West.

"She's such a duck," and Diana gave me a hug, "she listens to all the poetry I write. I write a great deal of poetry, Mrs. Hicks."

"I'm sorry to hear it, dearie," Mrs. Hicks said, comfortably, "but you're young and you'll get over it." Whereby I recognized at once that whatever else separated them Mrs. Hicks and Maria met on the ground of a common prejudice.

"I don't want to get over it, dear Mrs. Hicks. I'm going to be a poet and as soon as I publish a book I'll send it to you. I will really. You mustn't shake your head! Oh, you don't know how I've been wanting to see you! I've got so much to ask you. Why, it's ages since we've seen you! And how is dear Mr. Hicks and Brixton and—and Dicky?"

Maria sat behind her tea-pot, cold as ice—looking gloomily at her past in the person of Mrs. Hicks and her indiscreet child.

Mrs. Hicks had got rid of her tea-cup and she was bursting with pride. It was obvious that she had made this pilgrimage to the West for the sole and simple purpose of boasting of Mr. Hicks's amazing career. Maria tried her best to petrify her with an awful smile, but Diana punctuated the narrative with sympathetic hugs.

"When you left," and Mrs. Hicks tossed her black Prince of Wales's plumes, "we'd already got three shops, but now," and she was conscious of an utter lack of enthusiasm in Maria, "we've taken in everything, even your shop—a poor little thing not worth talking about," and I felt the claw under Mrs. Hicks's lavender kid. "You wouldn't know us again what with plate glass and electricity and a porter in gold lace!" But even this climax did not thaw Maria. She overlooked Mrs. Hicks in a superior way and then she turned to me and said, "I expected the Princess to tea. I thought it was she when you came in."

Mrs. Hicks's face fell. I saw that she made a gallant effort not to be crushed by such a familiar allusion to the higher aristocracy.

"Bother the Princess," said Diana, and urged Mrs. Hicks on to renewed effort with another hug.

"Dicky is in the business now; started at the foot of the ladder, he did. Tied up bundles and ran errands like an office boy, and he's had just enough schooling not to hurt. He couldn't be made to stay at school any longer, though father was set on it. But Dicky's always done just as he pleases; still he's a good boy, and father says he's a genius in the drapery line. He's in Paris at the 'Bong Marshey,' and the ideas he gets there and the French he talks—ah, well!" and Mrs. Hicks sighed because it was quite impossible for her to do justice to her paragon. "But of course you ain't interested," and she threw a defiant look across the cold tea-pot at Maria. But even before Maria could open her mouth Diana burst in with a whirlwind of enthusiasm.

"Do tell us all about it, dear Mrs. Hicks, mother's just dying to hear—and so am I."

Said Mrs. Hicks, making an effort to subdue her pride, "Mr. Hicks has been made an Alderman." Then she watched the effect on Maria out of the corner of her eye.

So! That was what had sent Mrs. Hicks across London to the West.

Maria only smiled coldly, but Diana more than made up for it.

"Isn't it just too lovely for words," and in her joy Diana kissed Mrs. Hicks's fat cheek. "Why, perhaps some day Mr. Hicks will be Lord Mayor of London. Won't that be grand! You'll invite us then, won't you? Only we mean to come before. I am so glad! Do tell him. And tell Dicky. I should love to see Dicky again, but I'm sure he won't remember me."

But nothing could make Maria thaw. She sat there clothed, so to speak, in a garment of ice, and she gave Diana an unadorned piece of her mind after Mrs. Hicks had been shown out by a forbidding parlour-maid, the only person in the world of whom Maria was afraid, and who cast a sarcastic glance at the departing camel's hair.

"I will not," Maria said indignantly, "be always pursued by a Mrs. Hicks from Brixton. Coming here to talk such rubbish. As if I cared. Alderman, indeed."

"But you haven't seen her for eight years," Diana retorted. "She's so proud of Mr. Hicks that she wanted you to know. I only wish it were dad. I rather think I should be proud, too! I'd hunt up everybody in the world I ever knew to tell 'em!"

"You're just like your father," Maria said severely. "You have no proper pride. One has to draw the line somewhere. I'd quite forgotten the Hickses. I refuse to know the Hickses. I refuse to be called upon by a camel's hair dolman. It has Brixton writ-

ten all over it. I wonder what Jones thinks of me!"
Jones was the forbidding parlour-maid.

I was with Maria when she was given a chance to be true to her principles. It was a late spring Sunday, and on the soft, green turf great beds of tulips flaunted their scarlet and yellow glory in the sun. The trees were a translucent green, and flocks of soft little clouds chased merrily across the blue, blue sky. In Hyde Park, past the expensive glory of Park Lane, along the select promenade that extends from Grosvenor Gate to Stanhope Gate, with a falling off of fashion towards the Achilles statue, there was an idle, sauntering procession of smart sinners who, having been to church and possibly repented of their sins, were now, with consciences comfortably at rest, exhibiting their masculine and feminine smartness to each other and, at the same time, getting up an appetite for lunch. Modish gentlemen in monocles and marvellous coats, with shiny silk hats and the tallest kind of collars, and gloves as immaculate as their consciences, strolled beside lovely young things, and much less lovely old things, in the very latest fashions in hats and frills and high-heeled shoes, and occasional "*rouge d'amour*" on their cheeks and perfect lips, and a good deal of rice powder on the ends of their haughty noses.

Dowagers with stony faces, who were never known to walk at other times, waddled up and down for a few minutes between the sacred limits, and then sat

down panting for breath on the green chairs that creaked painfully under them. And from here they could look at Lord Byron across the carriage drive or, beyond the Hyde Park Gates, at His Grace the great Duke of Wellington on his pedestal in a haze of green trees, reviewing the traffic of Hyde Park Corner.

To watch the strolling smartness saunter up and down under the trees, past the soft green velvet of the lawns, it really looked as if the gay young tulips and the old withered tulips had deserted their beds to take a Sunday promenade. A few dirty and hungry stragglers peered idly through the palings and watched the rich and the pious get up an appetite for lunch. And, really, it is nearly as hard to get up an appetite for a lunch that one does not want, as to subdue an appetite for a lunch that one has not got. But, as Maria reasonably enough said, as I pointed out this discrepancy in worldly prosperity, people like that should stay at home.

Diana loitered after us with her nose, a snippy nose not intended for the higher philosophy, uplifted in a most misanthropic way. From behind my back she assured me that she hated "church parade" more than anything else in the world. "Parade of miserable sinners," she called it.

"Just look at that old thing! He probably went about with the contribution bag," and she poked me with her young elbow. And, indeed, he was very old, and what hair he had was not unlike a poor little

rabbit skin under his shiny top hat, and, as he sat on a green chair with a perfect umbrella between his knees, he leered under the hats of the female miserable sinners with two faded eyes that should have known better.

Crowds of smart sinners lolled about on green chairs singly and in groups. And although fashion stopped short quite a distance from the dirty statue of Achilles, still there were some people broad-minded enough, or who didn't know, who even crowded the chairs about his unfashionable feet. And the air was full of spring, the soft rustle of silk and the murmur of voices, while the fragrance of earth rose as a thank offering to the sun. And everybody was well dressed, and the universal expression was one of no expression whatever.

Diana had mysteriously vanished, lost in a wilderness of chairs, and of course she reappeared triumphant from the unfashionable direction of Achilles. So like Diana.

"Do you know who is here?" and she darted towards Maria with unreasonable joy, "Mr. and Mrs. Hicks! They're right under Achilles, and they've come all the way from Brixton to see. Wasn't it lucky that I caught sight of them? Mrs. Hicks has got on that lovely cloak again. Don't you see them? Right under Achilles's arm. She's waving her parasol—bright green. You're not looking the right way, mother! They were so glad to see me. Mrs. Hicks

says just to look at all these people makes her feel lonesome. They came all the way from Brixton by 'bus. She says she's been dying to see church parade for years, but she's got enough of it now. Do come along, mother, she will be so pleased."

Maria made up her mind at once.

"I do not see them and I will not see them!" she said briefly, whereupon she turned on Mr. and Mrs. Hicks a back of the best Bessemer steel, just as if Mr. Hicks were a mere ordinary man and not an Alderman.

"*You stay here!*" Maria spoke in italics to her child.

"*I won't!*" Diana exclaimed, and before Maria could even begin to reason with her, Diana had pushed her way toward Achilles, and the lady in the camel's hair dolman who waved a green parasol, and a gentleman in black broadcloth, flowing side whiskers and a too early straw Alpine hat.

Both of them felt desperately out of it, and they were suffering from disillusion. Mrs. Hicks, full of longing to see the fashions, had started from Brixton with reasonable self-confidence in her toilet, which weakened as they approached Hyde Park. And, as they sat down on the two green chairs that creaked pathetically under them, Mrs. Hicks had to confess to herself that the day of the camel was over in the West. Even Mr. Hicks, although uplifted by the consciousness that he was an Alderman as well as, so

to speak, the great emporium of Hockin & Hicks in person, was seized as he sat there with terrible misgivings about his hat; he suspected that he was ahead of the fashion, which is quite as bad as being behind the fashion. It was just then that they were discovered by Diana, who in her youthful folly flew to greet them. Whereupon their spirits revived and Mr. Hicks waved his Alpine hat at Maria, and Mrs. Hicks swung her green parasol, just as if they were on Hampstead Heath on a bank-holiday, Maria said indignantly as she turned her back on them.

I ventured a last look at Achilles and had a glimpse of Diana sitting between Mr. and Mrs. Hicks holding each by the hand, with no proper sense of social distinction whatever.

"Wouldn't it have been dreadful if the Princess had seen me talk to them," and Maria shivered.

Then I discovered that Maria's only princess was sitting not far away and that there was an empty chair by her side. This, then, had been Maria's object and aim. The Princess herself was a dowdy, equine old lady with bands of iron-grey hair plastered against her long grey cheeks.

"I really must go and speak to her or she might feel hurt," and Maria glided in her direction. It was pathetic as well as informing to see Maria penetrate heroically into the orbit of those dull eyes. Finally she hovered over the empty chair. The Princess received her with a frosty stare.

"May I sit down a moment," Maria fluted, as the Princess continued to stare.

"Please don't," she said with the exquisite directness of the titled, "it's Darling's chair, and if he's hurt he bites, and he's so sensitive. Come here, Darling," and an old pug in a harness, a yellow satin bow, and a grey muzzle, clambered up and gave a few sample growls.

"I wouldn't take his chair for worlds," Maria said hastily, "the dear thing! But perhaps your Serene Highness doesn't remember me," she urged sweetly, like an eager but tactless nightingale.

"I don't," her Serene Highness replied quite simply, and detached her eyes from Maria with a jerk, as if they needed oiling. Of such are the minor tragedies of society.

I realised Maria's anguish when she rejoined me; she had been snubbed. Besides, she had been guilty of the most unpardonable of social crimes: she had been wanting in tact. I said nothing as I followed her, being lost in philosophic reflection, but I was conscious that both the Princess and the pug looked after us with undisguised resentment.

As soon as Maria regained control of her breath, which wasn't till she reached the French Embassy, she said loftily that it was not in the power of a person like that to snub her.

"For after all," she exclaimed, as we strolled past the barracks, and the air was full of the joyous twitter

of birds, and the light breeze swayed the golden rain of the laburnum trees, "for after all she is only a beggarly Russian princess, and she is no more Serene Highness than I am! I called her so out of politeness."

I wish the Princess could have heard the awful scorn in Maria's voice. It would have done her good. But it was inspiring to observe how Maria's loyal soul refused to be snubbed by any aristocracy that was not British.

"Perhaps now you know how the Hickses felt," I suggested, conscious of the necessity of pointing a moral.

It would be impossible to describe Maria's indignation. "I will not permit people to force their acquaintance on me," she exclaimed. "You seem to forget that Mr. Hicks is in the retail trade—not a company, mind you, but just retail. And one really has to draw the line somewhere. If he were a company I should have bowed."

"But where are you going to draw the line?" I urged in the perplexity of my soul. "How should we ever get our beer if it wasn't for the peerage? And don't half the peeresses trim our hats?" However, I recognised the awful difficulty of drawing the line, and that it can only be done by a very nicely adjusted society memory. Society memory being that delicate process by which one forgets the *ineligibles* and remembers the *eligibles*.

Maria was deeply depressed as we strolled home

down the soft slope of the park, past the browsing sheep in their new clothes of clean pink skin, which makes them look so singularly improper.

At last she exclaimed in a burst of patriotism, "After all, real royalty always remembers!"

That is possibly true, but who would ever venture to point out when real royalty forgets?

"At least I've learnt something," I remarked, as I stopped to watch the sheep, who ceased chewing to stare at me in nervous terror. "I know now what's necessary to get on in the world."

"To remember everybody, I suppose you mean," Maria said crossly. The Princess still rankled.

"O, dear, no, only kings can afford to remember. The only thing necessary is to learn to forget. You already do it very nicely, Maria, but the Princess does it better; she has had more practice."

I looked at the pink sheep nibbling their way towards martyrdom, unconscious of the day that would turn them into chops, and I thought how nice it is that everybody forgets; even sheep.

Maria had vanished. She hates other people's philosophy.

XI

MARIA ON DRAWING-ROOM FISHING

LIKE every great general Maria prepared her plan of battle long before she met the enemy. So she arranged to have an "at-home" day before she had any friends; so as to be ready. And many and many a day did she and I and Diana sit alone waiting for the front-door bell to ring, watching the cucumber sandwiches shrivel up, and the spirit lamp under the water-kettle burn itself out and leave a smouldering rim. As soon as six o'clock struck Diana and Holdall were permitted to roam freely over the sandwiches, to their thoughtless joy. Still it was wonderful to observe Maria gather in friends in the course of time.

As soon as Sir Peter was safely on the board of Smith Limited she seemed to think that gave her the right to annex the whole of Lady Tippett's visiting list. There were the Jephsons, the Peebles, the Simpson-Blotters, the Crockers, ex-M. P.s, the Pennortons, Angry Peck and, above all, Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, and out of these sweet bosom-friends Maria, like a bee, gathered other sweet new bosom-friends, until there was quite a trickle of friends on Maria's day. Of course there were the Dillbinkies, but the fact is

Maria was herself captured by Mrs. Dillbinkie, who had arrived in London from goodness knows where, with an ingratiating purr, and the best steel determination to get on.

It was Maria's day. All the callers had gone and she sat behind the disordered tea-table and held out to me by the tips of her fingers the last thing in card-cases. It was quite limp.

"That woman shall never fish in my drawing-room again," she cried with tragic emphasis.

"What are you talking about, Maria?"

"Mrs. Dillbinkie!" and she flung the card-case across the room.

I did not blame Maria. I watched the card-case hit the wall and felt that this was nature.

Mrs. Dillbinkie had adored Maria for a whole year. She had arrived in London from somewhere in the provinces as a kind of social orphan, tall and willowy, with dark, appealing eyes and a motor, and in her innocent way she, too, had gone fishing. It was when she was still socially as innocent as a daisy that she took a house in Bloomsbury and adored Maria. She not only took her to her heart, but she did what Maria liked much more, she took her to luncheon and things in her motor. Maria quite lived in Mrs. Dillbinkie's motor and I saw very little of her.

In her ardent friendship Maria strained her domestic resources to the utmost and gave a luncheon in

her honour to which she did not invite me, but she invited all the people she hardly knew: Sir Peter and Lady Tippett, the Crockers, ex-M. P.s, the Pennortons and the people who weren't the Pennortons but had five motor cars. She did not dare to invite Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones yet. Mrs. Dillbinkie sat at Samuel's right, which was the only drawback to her satisfaction as Samuel suffers from dyspepsia and punctuates his silence by pellets.

Mrs. Dillbinkie then invited Maria and all her guests to a gorgeous luncheon at the Carlton, and she placed Maria next to Mr. Dillbinkie, who never talks of anything but Mrs. Dillbinkie. This proved to be the climax of their friendship, for suddenly there came a blight. Maria arrived at my house in tears one morning at ten o'clock and announced that Mrs. Dillbinkie had given a superlatively splendid dinner-party at Claridge's to which she had invited all Maria's choicest friends except Maria. There are agonies over which it is best to draw the veil.

Such was Mrs. Dillbinkie.

"You kissed her, Maria," I said reproachfully.

"I didn't. She kissed me." I remembered Mrs. Dillbinkie's lingering kiss on the cold edge of Maria's ear. It required heroism.

"May I come again," she purred, "you are so sweet and hospitable." Whereupon she glided out, oblivious to Maria's glance which only reached a shy and apologetic man who brought up the rear, and who

was so scared that he quite forgot to say good-bye: Mr. Dillbinkie.

"She comes every time just to fish," and Maria was in despair. "She'll come until she's fished all she wants to, and then she'll never come again," and she relapsed into gloom. "And it's no use showing that I don't want her, for then she sends me flowers, and the ruder I am to her the more flowers she sends," she exclaimed in a burst of indignation.

I observed the floral offerings alluded to. They were tied up with satin ribbons as if they had the toothache.

"I never thought I'd hate flowers as much as I do hers! Look at her card-case; it was stuffed full when she came."

Maria's righteous indignation at the misuse of her drawing-room for illegitimate fishing made one realise how lofty were her own principles. Her attitude was that of one who would sooner die than fish. But the truth is one does resent in others what one doesn't mind a bit in oneself. Still Maria had her own aspirations, and, besides the Tippetts with their title, she had got as far as an Italian count, which was a distinct advance, for she had started with a modest "de," although "de" in France, she explained, means quite as much as a knight does here.

I suppose she was right, but "de" lacks the nebulous glamour of "Sir," which makes a knight sound quite as important as a baronet of the oldest crea-

tion, and only a butler or a parlour-maid would know the difference. But as Maria said, it was, on the whole, easier to start with the foreign nobility and then to ascend gradually to the British nobility, there being nothing higher than the British nobility unless of course one goes to Heaven.

I admire Maria immensely, she is always so straight —her figure, I mean. And yet I can not honestly say that she is consistent; she is not. She poached the count from the Crockers, ex-M. P.s' at-home.

Since Mrs. Crocker lost her seat in Parliament she has become much more affable. In her parliamentary days Mrs. Crocker owned a Bishop, and his legs conferred a great distinction on her gatherings. She used to entertain very nicely, and she always had a band and something extra; either a band and the Bishop, or the Bishop and Japanese jugglers, or the Bishop and recitations.

Maria always says that people must have music or they won't talk and they must also have something to stare at, and of all things they love to stare at the Great.

The Crockers had saved all sorts of odds and ends of nobility out of the wreck of their political fortunes, and among these was the Count. The Crockers were not nearly so grand as they used to be, and even the footmen, Maria pointed out, looked conscious of their reduced social position.

The first time I saw the Count at the Crockers,

society had crowded him against a suit of armour that ornamented a corner of the drawing-room, and as he politely raised his silk hat to his mouth to hide a yawn, his elbow came in sudden contact with the mailed fist, and turning with true continental civility to apologise, he encountered his cast-iron victim. He was still rubbing his elbow when his eye caught Maria's. Of course he looked foreign, but very nice, considering. He had smooth black hair, very carefully brushed back, and his little black moustache had a smart upward twist. His black eyes rolled considerably, but that was because he did not understand; and he clicked his heels together when he bowed, and seemed to find a good deal of comfort in the brim of his hat.

Maria could not believe her eyes when she saw this nobleman look about in an aimless, forlorn way. Like one inspired she got herself introduced at once, and before the Count knew what he was about she had made him pronounce her name—"Smiss"—for he was still on a straitened footing with the English language, and promise to come to her next at-home. Indeed, she had fished rather successfully at the Crockers, for when we left her card-case was as limp as Mrs. Dillbinkie's.

He was her first Count and so she was very much annoyed when I asked if she knew anything about him.

"The Crockers are very particular," she replied loftily. "People who are intimate with a bishop have to be. Besides, one can see the aristocrat in his

bow and his moustache and his feet. He has promised to come next Friday and I'm going to ask a few people to meet him. It would be so awkward if nobody came on one's at-home day. But that does happen. However, I shan't ask the Dillbinkies," and she looked vindictive.

"I told him I had a grown-up daughter, and he said he wouldn't believe it," and Maria threw it out as a challenge.

"So like a foreigner," I said.

I was in Maria's drawing-room on the eventful Friday when the parlour-maid came to grief over the Count's name; however, the title rang out with splendid effect and cast quite a glory on the occasion. Maria made a gratified swoop forward and engulfed the young man in an effusive welcome. Meanwhile a dead silence had fallen on the other callers, while Maria looked about to decide on whom she should confer the honour of an introduction; finally she singled out Sir Peter, who was just then bad with an incipient bronchitis. The Count listened with continental politeness to a few specimen coughs, but he clung to his hat as if for moral support. He had a great deal of cuff and pearl-grey kid glove.

It was just then, when Maria had reached the very pinnacle of her ambition, that the door again opened and the parlour-maid announced distinctly, as if she had found a haven of rest in the English language: "Mr. and Mrs. Dillbinkie."

If Medusa had entered, crowned with the sweetest of Paris hats and wearing the most enchanting of Paris frocks, Maria could not have been more completely turned to stone than she was at sight of Mrs. Dillbinkie armed with a purr and stretching out a beseeching and perfectly gloved hand. Mr. Dillbinkie hovered, as usual, on the outskirts of her frills.

Maria looked wildly about for Diana, but Diana was still too young to be depended on in danger; besides, she wasn't there—so like Diana. Maria looked at the Count as if her impulse was to gather him up and fly. Indeed she was so upset that she forgot to introduce him to any one but Sir Peter, and there he stood clicking his heels and smiling vaguely at everybody, with inclusive politeness. All the same Maria with a last effort at self-control was as adamant to Mrs. Dillbinkie's purr, and she accepted her hand as if it was change from the fishmonger.

Then she dropped the Dillbinkies and turned to the Count as if to protect him from contamination. Unluckily just then Mrs. Peebles was announced and as a sister-in-law to a baronet she could not be ignored.

"See to him!" Maria cried fiercely to me, and she glared over her shoulder at her enemy in frills, "and don't you dare to introduce them."

The Count and I were stranded on Maria's Empire couch without a back, and, by the way he rolled his black eyes, I felt sure he was very uncomfortable. Such English as he understood he understood wrong.

Mr. and Mrs. Dillbinkie hovered forsaken on the outskirts, but I read the signal in Maria's back that I was to do my duty. I did my best. I said things to rivet the Count's wandering attention, but I realised with a pang that the Count had caught sight of Mrs. Dillbinkie's frock and that he was by slow stages arriving at her soulful hat, and before I could protect him by flight Mrs. Dillbinkie had floated across, followed by Mr. Dillbinkie, who bowed ingratiatingly behind her frills.

"You never know me," she purred at me with pathetic reproach, "and you are always so surrounded one can never get near you." Here she rolled her dark eyes at the Count, who eagerly offered her his share of Maria's Empire couch.

I was faithful to Maria; I refused to introduce the Count to Mrs. Dillbinkie. I might, however, have with equal success tried to interfere between a lovely boa-constrictor and a particularly plump rabbit. What did Mrs. Dillbinkie care for introductions!

Before I could prevent it she had purred a few tentative words in what was possibly Italian to the Count, who looked gratified but puzzled, while Mr. Dillbinkie smiled upon them with ecstatic admiration. I sat there, a melancholy fifth wheel to a coach.

"Isn't it wonderful how she speaks Italian?" said Mr. Dillbinkie, and glowed with the pride of possession. "And to think she's only had five lessons!"

Her teacher told me that he hadn't heard such an accent, even in Tuscany."

I did not waste any reply on Mr. Dillbinkie, who is accustomed to being snubbed, but I turned an imploring glance towards Maria, who was just parting with affliction in bugles and a long crape streamer.

Telepathy, of course. She turned just as Mrs. Dillbinkie opened her card-case. There was that in Maria's eye which even daunted Mrs. Dillbinkie. She rose with a soft fall of lace, a faint aroma of violets and closed her card-case. She held out her hand to the gratified foreigner, and although she now spoke English it was with quite a foreign accent. Easier than Italian, I suppose, but the next best thing.

"Can I drop you anywhere? There is plenty of room in my car," she purred.

But this was too much for Maria. She interposed with a voice like that of a east-iron turtle-dove.

"You must not take the Count away, dear Mrs. Dillbinkie. My husband is so anxious to meet you," she fluted to the Count, who had risen, hat in hand, and looked rather wildly from one to the other. "He is so interested in all things Italian." Which was quite true, for Samuel had considerable knowledge of salad oil and macaroni, and Maria turned her back on Mrs. Dillbinkie and wedged herself between her and her prey. And Mrs. Dillbinkie threw a glance of sad coquetry across Maria's shoulder at the bewildered Count and floated out.

"But I should lof to go wiz ze lady, dear Madame," he pleaded, trying his best to put his foreign ideas into English, as he saw the lovely creature vanish, with Mr. Dillbinkie anxiously avoiding her skirts. "I should like to vere mutch. I come to you anuzzer time," he urged.

"I can't let you go without seeing my husband," Maria cried in despair, "he's longing to meet you."

If he was, he was hiding it with great success, as he stood before the cold fireplace with his coat tails parted.

"Come, Samuel!" Maria pleaded, and Samuel came. With an eager eye on the door and a despairing one on Samuel, the Count, still true to his continental politeness, clicked his heels together and bowed profusely, and took the hand which Samuel extracted out of his trouser-pockets and which he at once plunged back as if for refuge among his loose cash. After that there was a long pause during which the Count looked restlessly at Samuel, and Maria looked piteously at both. Why wouldn't they talk! Finally Samuel spoke and rattled the change in his pocket.

"It must be very trying to be a foreigner," and he cleared his throat.

"We are all foreigners somevere," the Count returned politely.

But Samuel turned on him with unexpected

warmth. "No!" he cried, "an Englishman is never a foreigner; he is always an Englishman."

"Zat is zair sharm," and the Count looked at Maria and shook his head. He seemed sorry for her.

"Dear lady," he said, "I can no more vait, but I vill come to see you again some ozzer time," and he raised Maria's hand and kissed it, to Samuel's speechless amazement.

"I want you to meet my Diana," and Maria spoke in a tone which she never employed towards Samuel.

"I vill come to see ze charming daughtere of ze charming muzzer," the Count said, and although he gazed at Maria with eloquent eyes, he nevertheless took a determined leave.

Maria looked at Samuel and gave a sigh of discontent.

"It's inborn," she sighed.

"What is?" he asked as he stopped rattling the change in his pocket.

"The aristocrat," she replied shortly.

"You don't mean him?"

"Who else?" and Maria turned disdainfully on her Samuel.

"I don't approve of his kissing your hand, Maria," and Samuel shook his head. "I call that very free. And I don't like his being a foreigner. I shouldn't like him to kiss Diana's hand. I should talk to him."

"Can't you ever get over being middle-class!" and I am sorry to say Maria flounced out of the room and

slammed the door behind her. As she said afterwards, what was the use of her trying to raise the family when neither Samuel nor Diana had any social sense. She felt sure that the aristocrat in the Count had rebelled against the plebeian in Samuel, and that was the reason he would not stay.

Possibly it was that, but a few days later I came across Mrs. Dillbinkie's electric brougham in a block in Piccadilly in front of Devonshire House, and the Count was sitting by her side, and the feathers of her great hat formed a kind of arbour into which he looked with ardent foreign eyes. His arms were crossed on the top of his stick and I recognised his little moustache and his wealth of cuff. Mr. Dillbinkie sat facing them on the small penitential seat and looked at them with proprietary admiration.

I was really sorry for Maria, but I had to acknowledge the supremacy of Mrs. Dillbinkie as a great artist in drawing-room fishing, for not only did she capture the Count at Maria's, but she also captured Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. At the same time I also discovered that Mrs. Dillbinkie never made the stupid blunder of capturing an agreeable husband rather than a disagreeable wife. With a purr like balm and an ingratiating forward bend of her perfect hat, she took quite as much pains to captivate a tiresome old woman who was desirable, as her delightful husband. What made her so safe was that, although she was captivating, yet she was not too captivating. Indeed

she never would have ventured to be too captivating to Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones for, although Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones says very little, as she needs all her spare breath for the purpose of living, she is always aware if a lady is too captivating to Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones, and then she says things. She herself has a red face and a tightly curled black front, and when her maid is occupied with her own affairs then Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones shows too much grey hair over her ears, and she is apt to wear purple dresses and bright green hats.

Maria's own friendship with the Fauntleroy-Joneses had only progressed to the point that she was invited to their crush "at-homes" twice a year, from four to seven. They never put R. S. V. P. on their invitations, which proves what great people they are, and how really indifferent to the cost of light refreshments. The vast, engraved card all but said, "Come or not; we don't care. The victuals are there anyhow." Maria felt quite safe in taking me to Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones's at-home because Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones never remembers anyone.

Several footmen in plush and powder helped to open the front door, and a serious butler in plain clothes waved us along a wide corridor with statues up the marble stairs to the drawing-room, where we found Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones supported on one side by a column and on the other by Fido. She looked apprehensively at her guests. In the near back-

ground was a floral creation of gold wicker work and orchids, suffering from a purple satin sore throat.

Maria gave a start of recognition at sight of this floral apparition; she had had such things herself, although not on nearly so expensive a scale. But she recovered herself and held Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones's hand as one only holds the hand of one to whose dinners one longs to be invited.

Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones looked at Maria with leaden eyes as if she were trying to think of something to say, when the butler announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Dillbinkie," and Maria's hand was dropped, and Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones held out two pudgy, gouty fingers, with a ghost of animation.

"How nice of you to send me those lovely flowers," and she wagged her head at the orchids.

"Just a few simple posies as a greeting, dear Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones," Mrs. Dillbinkie purred, and Mr. Dillbinkie bowed and smiled in time to the purr.

"Will you dine with us to-morrow night?" the great lady panted. "Quite informal."

Would they!

Mrs. Dillbinkie cooed a rapturous acceptance and looked triumphantly about her at every one but Maria—Maria, in whose drawing-rooms she had so victoriously fished! It took her quite a time to become aware of Maria's existence, and then she greeted her with condescension. The tragedy of it! Maria longed to dine at the Fauntleroy-Jones's much more ar-

dently than she longed to go to Heaven, and here she was left out in the cold, and the agony of it was that Mrs. Dillbinkie knew it.

Ought she to have been less economical and fished for the great gold-fish with orchids? Who knows. She was completely crushed.

As we rolled home in a four-wheeler, which we boarded out of sight of the Fauntleroy-Jones's noble footmen, Maria was so depressed that she never said a word until we pulled up at her front door.

"I daresay she won't send me any more flowers," she said.

"It would certainly be a very unnecessary expense," I admitted.

"When I think how I first invited that creature to lunch! And the things she's had since, and never invited me!"

I was silent in the presence of such social anguish.

"I sometimes lose all faith in friendship," she said solemnly as the door opened, and she left the parlour-maid to pay the cabby.

Diana came flying downstairs.

"I thought you'd never come," she cried. "I've been waiting for you for ever and ever! Guess who's been here!"

For the first time it dawned on me that Diana was emerging. She was still very plump, but it was a peach-like plumpness.

"I don't know and I don't care," Maria snapped.

She was suffering. "It's sure to be no one of consequence."

"Isn't it though!" Diana cried triumphantly.
"Guess!" but Maria refused.

"Well then—Dicky Hicks."

"Dicky Hicks," Maria gasped, just as the parlour-maid came back pursued by an awful voice saying things.

"The cabman says he'll summons you if you don't give him thruppence more," and there was a note of pleasure in the parlour-maid's upstairs voice.

"Here it is," Maria said bitterly, "and tell him I won't join the anti-sweating league now. And it's his fault. Isn't it awful for a woman like me to have such a middle-class family. The impertinence of Dicky Hicks calling. It's too dreadful. I'm sure I've shown the Hickses quite plainly that I don't want to know them."

"But he came without their knowing," Diana nearly sobbed. "He said he really only came to see me. He wanted to know what I was like. He's so nice and so funny. I wish you could hear him talk. He says his father's greater than Harrods. He's been in Paris to learn the French business, and now he's going to Germany. We had tea together and talked over old times. It was great fun. He said he didn't think I would grow up to be as nice looking as I am. He thought I used to be too stout. But he said skating would be splendid for me."

Maria turned on me an eye of despair.

"Just as I told you! She has no social sense; just like her father. If I'd let him he'd only ask people to the house he likes."

"He wants me to call on his father and mother while he's gone," Diana added defiantly, "and I shall."

"Stop!" Maria cried. "I won't hear another word about the Hickses. Not another word! Why, this is worse than writing poetry. Go to your room!"

Then Maria turned to me. "I'm all upset. You must come up. I want to talk to you about friendship. Do you know what that dreadful creature said to me? That her chauffeur only knows his way about on the other side of the park. And goodness knows where she started!"

Which goes to prove that if Mrs. Dillbinkie's chauffeur does not know his way about on the wrong side of the park Mrs. Dillbinkie has arrived. Besides, the Dillbinkies now live in Mayfair.

"Maria," I said, as she poured out a consolation cup of tea, "do you know, Diana is emerging? She is quite a 'cherry ripe' kind of beauty."

Maria smiled, for, after all, she is a mother. But then she shook her head and sighed.

"That's so like her. And just now, too, when nothing could be more unfashionable."

XII

MARIA ON ETIQUETTE

IMET Maria in Kensington Gardens crossing the bridge over the Serpentine. To my surprise, for Maria is not literary, I saw that she had a book under her arm.

It was a sunny afternoon and the sloping banks of the little river were all a green mist. I leaned over the stone parapet and watched the boats below scatter the ducks, who expressed their resentment by outraged quacks. Some black and white swans balanced lightly with the rise and fall of the water, while the gay parasols in the skiffs looked like great floating flowers. A few peacocks trailed their splendid plumage over the grass, or spread their royal tails, quite unconscious how badly they looked behind; and a few fantails strutted importantly up and down, for all the world like City Magnates in the process of reincarnation.

On the east, towards Westminster, the outline of distant towers melted in the summer haze, and in the West a slender church spire stood in a misty framework of trees.

The usual London sheep in their dirty grey fleece browsed placidly in the shade among the tall grass,

while in the bend, past the ivy covered powder-house and the red-coated sentinel, there swept a gay chaos of motors, carriages and cabs; and over all lay the glory of the young June sun.

On the right, towards Alexandra Gate, behind tall iron railings and an avenue of chestnut trees, stands the Kensington Gardens tea-house, and dotted about over the grass and under the spreading branches of the trees are innumerable little tables, each under a big-flounced parasol that flapped lazily in the soft breeze. The sun played hide and seek with the branches and fell on the grass in golden splashes. The little brown tea-house with a deep verandah formed a kind of background, out of which waiters in straw hats and long aprons darted with trays for the gay crowd under the parasols. Not that it really was a gay crowd; it was only a sober crowd in gay clothes. The women reclining in wicker arm-chairs displayed their frills and their feet, or dragged their long skirts over the grass, disturbing the greedy sparrows out for crumbs, while the men with them, in immaculate frock-coats and silk hats, gazed thoughtfully at Nature through a monocle, without which no man can admire Nature in Kensington Gardens.

We reached the gate, and Maria invited me to go in and have tea with her. Now, besides the tables with parasols, there are certain little tin tables without parasols, where tea only costs sixpence a head, while tea with the elect under a parasol and with a

table-cloth—reminiscent of other teas—costs a shilling.

I saw a short sharp struggle in Maria's back and then the shilling tea triumphed, and I followed her across the grass past the other votaries of pleasure, and we sank into two basket-chairs under a big elm and not far from where the iron railings divide the unemployed in the gardens from the unemployed who look hungrily over the railings.

I was glad that Maria had nobly decided on a shilling tea because a serene philosophic contemplation is most successful when one is comfortable. On one side we were wedged in by some lovely lounging creatures in big hats and frilly things, and on the other there foregathered a group of fiercely starched nursemaids with rattling petticoats, and tiny bonnets tied under their chins with immense bows, who had in charge the very latest thing in bare-legged, tow-headed infancy with rosy cheeks, accompanied by the latest thing in dogs, to whom they administered refreshment. And while the little dears stuffed themselves with plum cake, and pulled each other's flaxen curls or cuffed each other's fat cheeks, the young persons who had them in charge interchanged up-to-date gossip about the family affairs of their respective households.

While Maria raised her lorgnette and with the help of a long, cold stare tried to waylay one of the attendant servitors, there was much shrill conversation

going on at the table next to me. I really couldn't help hearing.

"Where is Miss Bender?" asked a young thing with an enormous sandy fluff and a big white bow under her pert chin.

"Miss Bender is too proud for us," another nurse-maid remarked acidly, as she shook her charge, caught in the act of drinking the cream. "Come here, Master Jimmy," she added sharply to a small boy, who was casting tentative sheep's-eyes at a very little girl with a frilly hat, and her thumb in her mouth. "Come here, Master Jimmy and I'll wipe your nose. You go and play with Lady Arabella, and don't hit her in the eye and p'raps some day you'll marry her. Don't look much like an earl, does he? But he'll be one by and by if his pa goes on drinking champagne and brandy mixed. My young man is our first footman, and he says the smell's enough to drive one silly. About Miss Bender?" she finally replied to the young person with the sandy fluff, "Miss Bender has been in the papers."

"Papers?" they all cried in shrill excitement.

"Where have you been? Haven't you heard? Haven't you heard about Miss Bender's lady and the inquest?"

They were so oblivious to their charges that Master Jimmy, the prospective earl, poured gravel down Lady Arabella's back.

"Miss Bender's lady," the young person con-

tinued with an eloquent sniff, "had a gentleman friend."

"She ain't the only one," a smart nurse-maid in grey tittered.

"And he always used to call when Miss Bender's lady's husband—he wasn't much, only a plain mister—was away goffin'. Last week Miss Bender's lady's eyes were dreadfully red, and so was her nose, because of tears. And at the inquest, Miss Bender said she had it from the house-maid that her lady's pillow used to be so wet in the morning she could wring it. One afternoon at tea time, Miss Bender's lady's husband being away goffin', the gentleman friend called, and the lady told the butler to say she wasn't at-home to nobody. The butler was so dreadfully superior that he wouldn't even look through the keyhole—he was all for etiquette—but he told the underfootman to look. And he looked till his eye ached, and then he went to the pantry to say he couldn't see nothin', and just then—now isn't it ever so—somethin' happened. Some never are there, are they? And after lookin' through the key-hole the best part of an hour, too! It was Miss Bender who got there first. I call that luck. And she screamed for the butler, and they two slammed the footman out. The butler called it etiquette.

"Yes, dead. Both. And when the coroner asked the butler how it happened that the deceased gentleman was found dead in one room, and the deceased

lady in her own, the butler said he'd been in the family all of six months and he felt for their good name. So he and Miss Bender had carried her over, Miss Bender, although a very young person, being frightfully discreet. I call that luck," and the narrator sighed with envy.

"And now Miss Bender says she isn't going' out nurse-maidin' any more; she's goin' as lady's maid, for the Coroner said he could only praise her for her discretion, and Miss Bender says discretion is worth much more to a lady's maid than hairdressin' or dressmakin'. Everything she said was in the paper," she concluded as a fitting climax to Miss Bender's prodigious career.

"And what did the husband do?" asked a very small nursemaid, whose charge was sound asleep in the perambulator in the embrace of a white "Teddy" bear.

"Do? He did nothin'," the acid one replied condescendingly, "but the next time he went goffin' he tied a bit of black crape round his goff club. He did really. 'Twasn't much, but it was somethin'."

I was still meditating over this pathetic tale of love, loyalty and etiquette, when the young persons rose with a cruel rustle of petticoats. They collected their bare-legged charges and their dogs, disentangled Master Jimmy from another young aristocrat who was punching his head, shook the gravel out of Lady Arabella, and, having treated their waiter with proper

hauteur, they swung their rattling skirts towards the Albert Memorial.

In the meantime Maria had succeeded in capturing a foreigner with a tea-tray which he deposited in front of her with an alarmed smile.

"It's a dreadful thing not to have children," Maria said gloomily, as we watched the nursemaids wheel the future legislators out of sight, "but when one thinks of the nursemaids, I can't help feeling it's more dreadful to have them."

While I puzzled out this cryptic remark, Maria poured out the tea.

"What have you got there?" I asked, for she had put her book out of reach of an inquisitive sparrow that had mistaken the purposes of the tea-table.

It was a pretty book all pink and gold, of the kind that tells one what to do and how to do it. Maria refused to pass it to me; she said my hands were probably sticky.

"Does it tell whether it is etiquette for a butler or an underfootman to listen at the key-hole?" I asked with some satire.

"If it hadn't been for this book," Maria said reproachfully, "I should have had an antimacassar on every chair."

I acknowledged that she had been saved from a fearful disaster. She added further that it was to this book she owed the information that when Samuel sat down he must never part his coat-tails. "To part

your coat-tails," says the book, "suggests an economy which is both obvious and inelegant. Coat-tails when well creased prove that they are not on your mind."

So far, Maria acknowledged with a sigh, she had not been able to make her Samuel oblivious of his coat-tails.

"Don't touch it," she said with some sharpness, "I'm sure your fingers are sticky!" which proved that she still needed advice from its inside.

"I bought it," she explained, as she tenderly covered it with her feather boa. So I forgave her, for I knew it was the only book she had bought in two years.

"You don't know what it means to me," she remarked with feeling. "It tells me everything. Nice binding, ain't it?"

The prophet had cost her four and sixpence net, and it was touching to see how little she grudged it. Her own observations on etiquette were most instructive.

How did society ever get on before people were introduced? Had I ever noticed how people who glared at each other before that, afterwards talked to each other in a most delightful way? However, I must say, that Maria amazed me when she said that the greatest obstacle to an enlightened etiquette is truth. She said that she had discovered that truth and etiquette never mingle.

Truth, she admitted, was a very beautiful thing, but had I ever observed that it was apt to be un-

pleasant? It was given to no one to be at once truthful and popular. Anarchists, she always understood, were truthful, but were they popular? She herself had brought up Diana to tell the truth and yet it had been her tragic duty to spank her for telling the truth to Uncle Titcomb. It was years ago, and the very little Diana, it seems, had overheard her mother remark that she sometimes wished Uncle Titcomb knew how trying he was. And so little Diana told him to please her mother.

Whereupon Uncle Titcomb confronted Maria with the truth according to little Diana, and said things only a relative can say who has money to leave. And Maria, distracted and out of breath, promptly declared that the truth was lies, and no sooner had Uncle Titcomb gone, quite pacified, than Maria spanked little Diana for telling the truth. But as she wisely said, there are times when the truth is a crime, for Uncle Titcomb might have gone home and in his indignation married his cook-housekeeper, an artful person with designs on single gentlemen.

Maria added that she loved the truth and she only wished she could tell some people just what she thought of them; and when they called she would give anything to tell them the truth by the parlour-maid, and that was that she didn't want to see them. And, when they invited her, to write truthfully that nothing would induce her to go to their tiresome parties.

"Truth is very noble," Maria acknowledged, "but one can't do that."

So for the first time I recognised the impolite nature of truth and the balmy influence of etiquette. As Maria said, one goes to parties and one nearly yawns one's head off, and then one goes up to the hostess and says: "Had such a lovely time. Thanks awf'ly," and the hostess says: "S'glad you came." Now, as Maria truly observed, had both said what they really meant it might have been very unpleasant.

"Say what you will," Maria continued, "one can do without truth but not without etiquette." And I agreed with her.

Maria put her study of etiquette in a nut-shell. "You see," she said, "the lowest class don't know and don't care; the middle-class don't know and does care, and the upper class knows but doesn't care."

Occasionally, she continued, some inspired being both knows and cares, and out of the fulness of such knowledge prevents the middle-class from eating pudding with a knife, drinking out of their finger-bowls, and shaking hands with the butler. Maria added that it was humanly possible to crush a butler, but she had only once seen a footman crushed, and that was at Mrs. Kiff's. But, as she said, only a person with five motors could possibly crush a footman. Now Mrs. Kiff has five motors; she is therefore correspondingly particular. Mrs. Kiff is the lady on whom Maria called by mistake

thinking it was Mrs. Pennerton. But as she left her card before she knew, Mrs. Kiff naturally thought it must be a dear friend, and so she called, and the friendship so auspiciously begun has flourished, for, as Maria said, people with five motor cars must be nice. Mrs. Kiff was very particular about etiquette, and once Maria saw her, as she was leaving her own house in one of the five motors, crush a footman who was about to hand her a forgotten parasol. She stopped him with a gesture, whereupon he retired humbly and came back with the parasol on a tray.

"Don't let it happen again, William," said Mrs. Kiff. Maria was deeply impressed.

"Maria, did he wink?"

"Who?"

"Why, the footman." It is difficult to be humorous with Maria.

"At Mrs. Kiff?" she cried in horror.

"I only mean did he wink to himself?"

"I suppose you think that's funny?" Maria said indignantly. "I've told you before that really nice women are never funny. Do I ever say anything funny?"

Never, I assured her, but I thought I had noticed a tendency that way in Diana.

"My child, Diana, say funny things?" and she was so horror-struck that she upset her tea-cup, and all the sparrows picking crumbs flew off in terror.

"Do you know what you are saying? Why, it'll

prevent her getting married. A funny girl has no chance, I'm sure that's the reason you're not married. It says in this book that it's very bad form to be funny! The upper classes are never funny, the book says."

I apologised and said I knew that humour and etiquette never did go together.

"I will not permit Diana to be humourous," Maria cried indignantly. "It's as bad as doing what nobody else does! It's dreadful to do what no one else does. And what should we do if it weren't for books like this? How I wish I knew enough to write such a book!"

I was surprised, for her usual opinion of literature is not flattering. She describes it as another form of laziness.

"It isn't literature," she said warmly, as I pointed this out to her. "It's more like the—like the Bible. But of course it's only the nobility who really know anything about etiquette. They don't have to learn it; we do," and she sighed. "Have you ever noticed," she continued, "how much more elegant the rudeness of the nobility is than the rudeness of the middle-classes? They inherit it. I've tried to be rude that way myself, but I can't quite do it," she said with noble humility. I consoled her by saying that I had seen her so rude that it would have graced any station in life.

"Isn't it a wonderful book," and Maria took it up

and dipped into it for bits of wisdom: "What one does in life is not so important as how one does it."

"So true, isn't it? There's no comfort like knowing one's doing the right thing in the right way, is there? It's so dreadful to do it in the wrong way! The worry I have about visiting-cards," and Maria spoke with feeling, "I'm never quite sure which corner I ought to turn up, and when I've turned it up I don't know what it means, only I do it because everybody else does. But the awful mistakes one makes if one don't know! Last week I left cards on Sophia Peebles because of the death of her husband. So she won't be Lady Peebles after all. I turned down a corner for fear she'd think I didn't know, but when I came home and read it up in the book, I found I'd left my congratulations. Awkward, wasn't it?"

"Never mind, Maria. Mrs. Peebles is middle-class; she probably mourns without etiquette."

"You are quite mistaken," Maria retorted. "The middle-classes adore etiquette, or nobody'd write these lovely books."

I felt Maria was right. The time will come when the only perfect manners left will be found among the middle-classes, long after the nobility have even forgotten their tradition.

"Do let me look at the book," I pleaded. "I won't hurt it, for I've put my gloves on over the stickiness."

And while I studied the pink and gold prophet of

how to do it, Maria put up her lorgnette to see if there was any one there she ought not to see.

"Maria!" and I looked up from the inspired volume with real sympathy, "prepare yourself for an awful shock: the lady who wrote this book is not a lady at all."

"Not a lady? What is she? Go away!" she cried imperiously to the foreigner with the tray, who lingered on the outskirts and abjectly requested to be paid. Still unaccustomed to the British stare, he fled before it to an individual with more crumpled shirt-front and less apron, by which I concluded that he must be the chief of the waiters.

"Well, what is it?" Maria repeated.

"She isn't a lady or a woman," for I felt the necessity of breaking it gently to Maria. "The fact is she is a man."

Maria stared at me and I stared at a sparrow who behaved in such a way that he ought to have had a bird's own book of etiquette.

"Man!" Maria gasped.

"I didn't mean to tell you, for you are so prejudiced and exclusive. And I only do it because of the book. Well then, Mrs. Hicks gave an at-home last Friday afternoon and invited me, and I went. There, don't look so shocked. I must say she did it very well. You know I always liked Mrs. Hicks, and the Hickses have changed just as much as other people I know," and I looked rather severely at Maria.

"The Hickses live in Effra Road now in that Gothic house your husband wanted to buy long ago, and she's got an at-home day and a gramophone, and although it may not interest you, Mr. Hicks is now Mayor of Brixton, and Dicky is in Berlin studying German fashions with a French accent."

"You'll excuse me if I don't see what that has to do with the book," and Maria tapped the grass with her foot.

I held up the pink and gold prophet. "It has; for Mrs. Hicks consulted him to tell her how to do it. Bear up, Maria—he lives in Brixton. She wore black velvet and duchess lace, and she had on very tight kid gloves. She introduced him to me at once because, as she told him, I came from the West End, and she felt sure we had so much in common. Mrs. Hicks is really such a dear thing, Maria. It seems he had had considerable rum with his tea and that made him very confiding, so he explained to me that although he lived in Brixton he felt that spiritually he belonged to the West End. But he was glad to say that he had not lived in vain, for it had been his mission to teach the earnest inquirer, among other things, not to give *soirées* in the morning nor to wear dress-clothes in the afternoon. It had even been his privilege to guide Park Lane along the intricate paths of how to do it. Still, I don't quite believe that—I put that boast down to rum. Then he went on to say that he felt I was a kindred soul, and so he'd really like me to

know that he'd soared into literature. And when I urged him to fuller confession, he told me it was bound in pink and gold, and he only wished authors could realise the importance of bindings in literature. At last I persuaded him to tell me the title, and that's the title," and I nodded at the pink and gold prophet.

Maria seemed incapable of speech, but she took up the pink and gold prophet by the tips of her fingers.

"What are you going to do?" I asked in alarm.

"Return it," said Maria. Then she stopped, confronted by a fact as by an apparition. "I can't!" she cried in a tragic voice. "It's been cut."

Just then the foreigner and the man with the shirt front bore down upon us.

"Give it to Diana for a Christmas present," I suggested, like one inspired.

"If," she said with a great deal of pathos, "if you will promise never to tell her that it was written in Brixton! What do you want?" For the foreigner barred our way out and the other man brought up the rear. We were the last in the tea-garden. The tables were already bare and deserted, the waiters were rolling up the parasols, and the trees rose black against the glowing red of the sunset.

"Ze lidy 'as forgot to pay," and the foreigner scraped and bowed with a politeness which it is England's boast that she does not need.

"So I have!" Maria admitted, and she counted her debt into the dingy hand worn with carrying

trays for the wrong unemployed, "but I shan't give him anything because he bothered me."

He turned away with Maria's just debt in his hand and sighed.

"Maria," I said, "shall I give him the book on etiquette?"

But, as I have said before, Maria has no sense of humour.

Twilight was falling, and the wood-pigeons had begun their monotonous chant, across which the cry of the peacock fell like the rasping strum of a bass-fiddle.

We took the sloping path down the hollow along the Serpentine, past the fountain where the ducks and their families live behind the water-nymphs.

Maria roused herself.

"Promise me something," she urged. "It is so sweet to encourage the illusions of youth. Promise me never to tell her that it was written by a man in Brixton!"

And I promised.

The air was full of the freshness of young June; a bird darted over the misty waters, and the plants along the edge prepared to go to sleep. The irises had extinguished their yellow and purple torches, and the reeds stood motionless like sentinels. Clusters of weeping-willows swayed softly in the light breeze. A peacock strolled up and down with a mincing gait and trailing tail. Two human wrecks lay at either end

of a bench, and between them was a dirty newspaper full of hideous fragments. A female wreck and a male wreck—rags, filth, and despair.

"As I said, the illusions of youth," and Maria clutched her skirts and avoided the bench.

Before us lay the long road with rows of brilliant lights outlining its curves and its twinkling confusion of traffic. A benevolent policeman stopped the traffic and saw us safely across.

"I don't think," said Maria, "I don't think there'd be any anarchists in the world if people were more polite to each other. But, of course, if you really want to be polite you must know something about etiquette."

It is possible that Maria is right.

XIII

MARIA ON WEDDING PRESENTS

MARIA does not so much require my advice as that she uses me for a safety-valve. When I got to her I found her tearing her hair, that is, of course, not her own hair. She was sitting on the milking-stool with the painted plums and staring at the harp.

She turned on me an extinguished eye.

"What shall I do? A dreadful thing has happened!"

For a moment I thought of Samuel and Diana, but Maria shook her head mournfully when I asked.

"I've done something dreadful," and she spoke as if in an awful dream. "I sent a wedding present to Lord McIntosh's daughter——"

"What for? You don't know her."

"But I know him at church. I picked up his ear-trumpet one Sunday and he's bowed to me ever since."

"Well?" for Maria seemed unable to extricate herself out of a pause.

"You see I bought it at Hockin & Hicks," and Maria groaned. "I went for it all the way to Brixton

and I put on Diana's sailor hat for fear I should be recognized. For it's so cheap there! You never saw a place so changed! All built over, and porters in gold lace at every door. There never was anything like it. All London there and pretending not to be."

Indeed Hockin & Hicks have swallowed up everything in the neighbourhood in their brick jaws and they sell everything under the sun, and, as Maria said, gold laced porters stand at every door, with carriage umbrellas when necessary, to help the aristocracy to alight. Hundreds of customers flock in every minute, and, in the very middle, Mr. Hicks sits in state in a brand new office all leather chairs and mahogany, and with a clock that strikes as impressively as a cathedral clock, and invites the public in like a kind, shrewd spider with grey side-whiskers. And he has at his command hundreds of male and female minions in black and the latest thing in collars. Mrs. Hicks in Effra Road has greenhouses and all the modern improvements, and Dicky Hicks is back from foreign parts and overflowing with emulation of foreign shop-windows. He is a chip of the old block, and with such a genius for making the plate-glass windows alluring, that even the West-End drapers send their window decorators to Brixton in search of inspiration. For Dicky can stand in front of a glittering plate-glass window and create nocturnes out of silk petticoats, and frescoes out of artificial flowers. Or he can design dramas without heads—so character-

istic of dramas!—out of marvellous dresses and hats (always without heads). Or, like other great dramatists, he can construct comedies simply out of frock coats and evening clothes. But of course everybody in London knows Hockin & Hicks, only they pretend they don't.

“I told the assistant,” and Maria reverted to her trouble, “not to have the shop name on the wrapping-paper, for it does so spoil the value of a present if it comes from the wrong place, doesn't it? And I said to him over and over again to be sure and send me the bill for I couldn't pay; I only had three shillings in my purse. Wasn't it dreadful! And do you know what happened?” and Maria took a long breath of anguish. “They sent her the bill with the present, and oh!” she cried in a spasm of agonized sincerity, “it was so cheap!”

“But how did you find out?” I asked after a painful pause.

“Miss McIntosh wrote to say that she was so grateful and enclosed the bill.”

“Write at once and beg her to return it, and say it was intended for some one else,” I urged, like one inspired.

“I can't,” Maria wailed, “her name's engraved on it.”

“Serves you right for not giving her the chance to exchange it. I call it cruel!”

“What shall I do?” and Maria moaned.

"The idea of giving anything cheap to the rich! What was it?"

"It was a silver blacking-brush with cupids all over it," Maria replied in a subdued voice.

"What did it cost?" I asked, with unfeeling curiosity.

"Seven and sixpence, but," and she tried to rally, "the white satin box was extra."

"My dear," I said, after a dramatic pause, "it isn't so much offering the aristocracy seven and sixpence, as the having it found out."

"I didn't send for you to tell me that," Maria cried irritably, "but I thought you might give me some advice."

"My only advice is always to keep your cheap presents for the poor."

"I know that as well as you," Maria retorted gloomily.

However, it was this social tragedy that drew Maria's attention to the philosophy of wedding presents.

As she remarked: "To him that hath shall be given," is particularly true of these spontaneous offerings of friendship. The very foundation principle being, according to her, that people who don't need any presents always get them, and the less they need the more they get, and the poorer they are the less they get, and what they get is always suitable for people in reduced circumstances, which is, after all, quite as it should be.

Although Maria was false to her own principles in the case of Miss McIntosh—still she had learned a lesson. In giving to the rich and great one necessarily runs the risk of comparison, and it is comparisons that make gifts so expensive. Of course, she said, there are the rank and file, who are neither rich nor poor, to whom one can give anything; the only question being to decide how little it will do to give. In fact, under those circumstances, she said, it is of no earthly consequence what one gives as long as one gives something. Had I noticed how popular umbrella handles were as presents to young things about to enter upon the joys and trials of a new life? Then, too, there was a delightful selection to be made from toast-racks, fish-knives, “pepper and salts” and coffee-spoons (the kind with a weak spine), and fancy clocks, too (those that won’t go). Maria was, I regret to say, greatly prejudiced against the classics in special bindings, their ultimate destiny, she assured me, being dust.

The evolution of Maria’s taste in art was also very instructive. The danger of amateur painters to the newly wedded she assured me was very great, for the temptation to utilise their works of art as wedding presents being quite irresistible. She spoke from experience, for she had only just bestowed one of her own wedding presents, a group of water-lilies on a japanned background like a stove-lid and damaged by time, on an art-loving charwoman.

The very next time I saw Maria she looked up from *The Morning Post* with a tragic sigh. "What is the matter?" I asked anxiously.

"The Simpson-Blotters have twins—girls."

"That," I said relieved, "is after all only unpleasant for the Simpson-Blotters."

"And some day," and Maria spoke as if she had a terrible vision, "they'll get married and we shall have to give them wedding presents. And there're two of them."

"I really think you are borrowing trouble," I urged. "After all, they are only a day or two old. Besides, long before that Diana will be wanting wedding presents," I said by way of consolation.

"It would be just like Diana to run away with some one," Maria said despondently, "and then she won't get any. People are so glad of an excuse not to give. Or perhaps she won't marry at all; she's so like her father."

While I pondered over this singular resemblance, Maria again studied the columns of *The Morning Post* to see if by any chance the Simpson-Blotter twins had decided that life was not worth living. She put the paper down with a sigh.

"I really think that these days people don't so much marry for love as for wedding presents," and she shook her head gloomily. "There's Angy Peck. That's the only reason she married. She told me herself that she'd given away so many wedding presents

in her life that she made up her mind that it was about time she got some back while she had a chance. She did say she wished she hadn't decided to get married now because of the New Art, although I don't agree with her," and Maria threw a critical glance at her back drawing-room. "But Angy Peck never did know anything about Art. She said she was so discouraged when she got thirteen New-Art clocks that wouldn't go, and fourteen New-Art hot-water cans. And she complained, too, about the New-Art jewellery, and she said she was so tired of enamelled pendants that the very sight of peacock blue makes her sick. On the whole she thought marriage was disappointing. They took the clocks and the hot-water cans in a four-wheeler and tried to exchange them, but the people wouldn't exchange them for anything. Mean, wasn't it? And Angy told me that the dear old General said he'd be d—d—he did really!—if he'd tout that infernal stuff about any more, although half of it came from his friends. And by the time they got home they wouldn't speak. But now they've agreed not to buy any more wedding presents till all these have been given away, so I dare say it'll be a saving for them in the end," Maria concluded thoughtfully.

"What did you give her, Maria?" I asked with inhuman curiosity.

"It was only to show her that my heart was with her, and she wrote back at once to say how grateful

she was. My hot-water can was the first; she only complained when there were fourteen."

While I tried to reconcile this with "O perfect love" and "The voice that breathed o'er Eden," which had floated over Angy Peck's bowed head at St. Margaret's—it had floated three times over the General's—Maria went on in her illuminating way about wedding presents.

"I do hope that amethysts and topazes will be out of fashion before Diana marries, if she ever does. Mrs. Pontifex said her daughter cried nearly every time a box was opened, for the inside was either purple or yellow. Then, too, she got seventeen toast-racks. Awful, wasn't it! The Simpson-Blotters sent an amethyst tiara, and now they have twins. How glad the Pontifexes must be!"

Maria seemed to consider the Simpson-Blotter twins as the instruments of a divine and unhumourous wrath.

"To go back to Angy Peck—I really can't call her Hopper yet—and to show how careful one ought to be! She gave the Crockers a silver-plated muffin-dish as a silver wedding present, and if they didn't send it back to her again as a wedding present. They'd forgotten. She recognised it by a dent, and she *was* so annoyed. She already had seven. And she couldn't change it because she had forgotten where she had bought it; besides, it was so long ago. One really can't be too careful when one gives one's presents

away," Maria said with feeling, as she poured more water in the teapot.

"I never seem to have known a bride who had so many trials as Angy Peck. Think what the Tippetts sent her—a silver-plated burglar-alarm. And the General a V. C. I told her it was impolite. Angy made up her mind to exchange it at once. It was a horrid, bulky kind of parcel, and when they got to the shop and the General was explaining to the assistant that he wanted to exchange a present, Angy coughed just as he began to undo the knot. Now even Samuel understands that cough, and the General should, for Angy is his third. Luckily it was a hard knot and the General is a fussy old thing. He didn't look up, and all he said was, 'What a cold you have, Angy, and why are you poking me?' But when he did look up, there stood Angy purple from coughing and trying hard to smile at Sir Peter Tippett. She told me all about it afterwards.

"She said the General had quite forgotten that it was the Tippetts's present, but he ought to have understood her when she looked at him and said, 'Never mind opening it now, dear, for I'm in a hurry.'

"'Open it? Of course I shall,' said the General, 'and you can't be in a hurry, for that's what you've come here for.' Then he said, 'Glad to see you, Sir Peter, we've come on the usual errand of the newly married: exchanging wedding presents. One does get such awful rot. What's the matter, Angy?'

"Angy said if she could have killed the dear old General with a look just then she would have done so cheerfully.

"She had just strength enough to say, 'We're at the wrong counter, darling. Come up-stairs. Never mind about that stupid tiara,' and she pushed the General away from the counter and clutched the parcel. She says the General's eyes simply bulged out with surprise.

"'Do let me help you choose something else,' Sir Peter roared. I suppose he wouldn't roar so if he heard better. 'I'm great at giving people what they want.'

"'Do! we'll be so glad to get rid of this rubbishy thing. Give it back, Angy. What are you about?'

"'It's all right, darling. I haven't made up my mind what I want instead. What a lovely present you sent us, Sir Peter! We won't exchange that, will we, dearest?' and Angy said she tried to smile, but she felt that the corners of her mouth needed oiling. And then she flew out with the burglar-alarm clasped to her heart. The General found her at last in a four-wheeler crying as if her heart would break.

"'What do you mean by it?' he spluttered, although they had hardly started on their honeymoon.

"'Mean?' she cried, and she nearly went into hysterics in the four-wheeler, 'don't you remember that the Tippetts gave us the burglar-alarm?'

"'By Jove,' and the General whistled. But if you'll believe me he turned on her—so like a man—and do you know what he said? 'Why didn't you tell me, Angy?'

"She said that she cried till the burglar-alarm was quite wet through; and no wonder. But when they did exchange it, it was for something the General wanted. Of course."

I went with Maria to buy a wedding present for the Kiff girl. She gave as reason for her generosity that people always remember if you don't give anything, although they are apt to forget if you do. Besides, the Kiffs give dances and she had Diana to consider.

We were in a four-wheeler, and Maria was dabbing rice powder on her nose by aid of the cracked cab glass.

"How they do crawl by the hour," she exclaimed and darted her head out of the window.

"Do, please, hurry," she remonstrated to the cabby, "or we shall never get anywhere." Here she looked over her shoulder at me: "Take them by the hour and one knows just what they are!"

"O, shet up, mem," and the cabby looked back at Maria, "you take away my peace o' mind! Lud! I wouldn't be the cove as owns you!" he concluded with appalling satire. "Haw! yis!" and he tickled the back of his steed with his ragged whip until the long, white profile broke into a gratified smile.

"Wasn't it lucky Samuel didn't hear," Maria whispered, and she looked quite scared as we pulled up before the silversmith's in Regent Street.

However, she descended out of the four-wheeler as if it didn't belong to her, which is the proper way.

Shopwalkers are superior even to the Herald's College for putting people in their right place, and many a one I have heard ask Maria if her "car" was waiting. She has such a way with her. And yet she has what is infinitely superior to a motor manner, she has a carriage manner. It hypnotised the porter, who, blind to the evidence of a four-wheeler, flung open the door with a deference he usually reserved for electric broughams.

"I wish to buy something," she explained to a perfectly manicured shop assistant, "that will look as if it cost a good deal, but it must not be expensive."

"That is what ladies always want, and we make a speciality of just such articles," and he bowed his perfectly parted head.

"It is for Peggy Kiff," Maria said to me in a stately aside, for the benefit of the assistant. "Her mother is a great grand-daughter of Lady Lufkin by another husband."

While the assistant smiled a vague smile of gratification, and I tried to disentangle the relationship, Maria looked with covetous eyes at a glittering, bulbous, silver soup-tureen that spread itself over the counter.

"What is the price of that?"

"Maria!" I remonstrated.

"A sweet article," and the assistant waved his manicured hand to the turceen by way of introduction.

"Unfortunately it is sold, although it may come back. It's a bargain. Looks expensive, don't it? It's been at every smart wedding these ten years. But it always comes back; it's more than paid its way. We look upon it as a fixture," and he smiled and showed his perfect false teeth, "and we gentlemen in the shop call it 'The Prodigal' because it is always returning. Yes, it's going to the Kiff wed-ding. You'll see it there."

"Just what I wanted!" Maria exclaimed, for she felt she was safe. But the assistant was so impressed by the magnitude of her ideal that he ceased to be humourous. For it is impossible to be at once humorous and respectful. Everybody knows that. So he produced with pathetic alacrity an infinite variety of presentation plate and antique silver, and after making an exhaustive enquiry into the relative values of a Charles II. punch-bowl and a Queen Anne coffee-urn, until the assistant rubbed his hands in gratified anticipation, Maria finally choose an Edwardian pickle-fork.

The assistant sighed painfully as he laid it at rest in a blue satin box.

"It isn't so much the present as how it is packed," Maria explained as she paid the bill, and such was

her dignity that the assistant offered to carry the burden to her "car."

"I will not trouble you," she said with affable condescension, as she swept out with an air that ought to have led to something nobler than a four-wheeler. And as I climbed in after her I rather hoped the assistant wasn't looking.

Our driver, who had been refreshing his intellect with a dip into "Ally Sloper," freed his steed from the nosebag out of which it had been taking a slight lunch.

As we jogged towards Piccadilly Circus Maria explained a good many things. She said if one soars above the middle-class a marriage is "arranged" for one, while the middle-classes usually do it for themselves. The higher you soar the more the whole family takes a hand in it, and the farther you seem to get away from a mere wedding. And when you are fearfully high, so high that you can't possibly get any higher, the ceremony is only alluded to as "nuptials." Maria acknowledged that "nuptials" were entirely beyond her aspirations for Diana, but she felt that she would die happy and contented if Diana could ever achieve having a marriage "arranged" for her in the columns of *The Morning Post*.

She also enlightened me as to presents at "nuptials." Presents at nuptials, she informed me, never have anything to do with the New Art, from which I gathered that the New Art is the aspiration of the

middle-classes seeking for economical expression. She further added that what had often troubled her in the event of Diana's ever marrying, was that the list of important guests for the fashionable intelligence might not be important enough; but this worry had been entirely dispelled by the sensible fashion of only giving a list of guests who are invited. And, as Maria said reasonably enough, there's no one one can't ask.

In Piccadilly Circus our charioteer turned his reluctant steed so that he ambled slowly past the flower-girls who ornament the steps of the fountain. While I was lost in meditation I seemed to hear Maria's voice as if it came out of a fog. An elderly flower-girl thrust a rose into the cab-window.

"Go away," said Maria.

"Hev' a rose, lidy. On'y a penny."

Although Maria declined, she said to me: "Arn't our flower-girls nice and plain! Just look at that fat one with the sailor-hat and the untidy hair sticking out. She's so cross-eyed. Samuel gets a buttonhole from her every Saturday; has for years. I don't believe there's another city in the world," and Maria spoke not without triumph, "where a man could do that and be safe. It's the sort of thing that makes one glad to be English and so respectable. I don't believe there's another such a respectable nation in the world."

"Maria," I interrupted, as we jolted through the

traffic of Piccadilly Circus and slid gently over the pleasant London mud into Waterloo Place, "why in the world do you suppose most people give wedding presents?"

Maria turned on me an eye that detached itself from the contemplation of British virtue, and flashed with a cold glint not unlike steel.

"Because," and her words had the ring of absolute sincerity, "because they can't help themselves."

XIV

MARIA ON CHARITY

MARIA wrote a beseeching letter to each one of her friends imploring them to give her something for her stall at the Costermongers' Bazaar, or, rather, to be exact, her barrow. There were to be many barrows, and the presiding ladies were to be dressed as costermongeresses, whatever that costume is. Maria had a hazy notion that it was connected with pearl buttons.

I went to see her in answer to her entreaty and found her holding a kind of dress-rehearsal on the dining-room table, which was covered with all those singular odds and ends which so happily illustrate the truth that it is much better to give than to receive.

"What's this, Maria?" and I held up a tin horn tied up with yellow ribbons. Maria ignored my question while she explained how she had written to everybody to ask if they couldn't give anything, would they perhaps buy tickets?

"They are a shilling apiece, and, would you believe it, Mrs. Dillbinkie at once wrote back for two. Good of her, wasn't it? For I didn't expect of it her," Maria acknowledged. "I never gave her credit for

being charitable. I wish people didn't hate one so for asking them to buy tickets."

"Do tell me what this is?" and I again drew Maria's attention to the tin horn with the yellow satin ribbons.

"That? That's an ear-trumpet from Lord McIn-tosh. He thought it might be just what somebody would want. And he's got too many. Kind of him, wasn't it? Yes, those are Miss Bispho's poems—six copies," and Maria sighed. "She had them printed herself and she's written her name in each, and that makes them more valuable. It's all about how she felt when she first saw Jerusalem. She and her brother kept house there for a year, and she told me it's the hardest thing in the world to get any decent bacon there. But of course that's natural. I'm sure you'll want a copy," and Maria looked at me out of the corner of her eye. But Maria was mistaken.

"Hand-painted plates. Yes, Miss Tippett sent them; there are only five, for one broke in the firing, so I'll sell them cheap. Nice decoration. Yes, spiders in their webs. You wouldn't like to eat off spiders? I hope you'll never eat off anything nastier. How people run to pin-cushions and bags. That's tomato marmalade from Mrs. Peebles. I do hope she'll buy it back. That? Isn't it dreadful? It's a night-dress case. And what shall I do with it! So handsome, too, ain't it? The very best yellow satin. From Mrs. Kiff, too. She ought to know better, with five

motor-cars. Looks just like the suburbs, don't it?" she said with a sigh of despair. "Wonder if you'd buy it?" she suggested in an excess of hope.

I was annoyed! To think she'd offer me that. She'd never have dared to offer it to Mrs. Dill-binkie.

"It would be so useful," she urged as she held it up, "you could make a nice opera hood out of it, and use the flap for a cape behind. And you know you always have neuralgia when you go to the theatre."

However, I refused.

"That's a tea-cosy. But I'm sure it's been used. It's from Mrs. Pontifex, and she'll be certain to say we did it. I won't put it out for sale till it's dark, so if any one buys it they won't see. Dear me, yes, that's from Uncle Titcomb. Think of sending a Bible to a bazaar. That's just like him, and he'll be so annoyed if it isn't sold, so I am sure I shall have to buy it myself," Maria said with a sigh of resignation. "But it won't be lost, for I'll give it to Diana for a Christmas present when hers is worn out," and she rallied. "That's a new kind of sanitary tea-pot. I do hope the painting hasn't come off. You oughtn't to touch everything. It wasn't quite dry. Looks real Japanesy, don't it? No, Diana did it. Glued on? The idea! It's painted.

"You get them at Whiteley's. There's a lady there who teaches how to do it. I sent Diana for a lesson. Sometimes I think I'll let her go in more for Art than

she does. She just loves it. She quite adores squeezing the tubes."

Here Diana skipped in with a big parcel; she was full of anticipation.

"From Angy Peck! I felt sure the dear girl would send me something."

Here she opened the parcel. "Dear me," she said rather feebly. The parcel contained a New-Art hot-water can. A card was tied to the handle. "So delighted to send you a little offering for the good cause," Angy wrote.

"Why, if it ain't your own wedding present to her," and Diana quite gasped. "You remember the handle was a bit scratched so they let you have it cheaper? She's forgotten."

Maria stared at her child and remarked bitterly that friends are terribly disappointing, but when it comes to children they are rather worse than serpent's teeth, and that on the whole she did hope that the rest of her friends would buy tickets, for they all got so furious if their things didn't sell. She said she was greatly discouraged, for she felt it would be so difficult to harmonise all the things on her barrow. The hot-water can, though New Art, was a great problem, and she had nothing to balance it but Lord McIntosh's ear-trumpet. Her only hope was in yellow satin ribbon.

"People think so much more of things if they are tied up with ribbons," she explained. "It really makes the most dreadful things go."

"I've spent ten and sixpence on ribbons already," she continued mournfully, "and there's nothing to show for it. And I wouldn't have spent anything if it hadn't been for Diana. I only took the barrow on Diana's account, and because of the young men. It's so good for them to see how becoming it is to a girl to be charitable. Of course I had to get her a new dress, and Samuel said he thought it would have been more sensible if I had sent the price of it direct to the costermongers. So like a man! Unreasonable! I've paid for the ribbon out of the housekeeping, and there's Diana's dress, and two and sixpence for the sanitary tea-pot—that's all. Take the tea-pot down to cook and ask her to put it in the oven to dry, Diana. But do you know," and Maria paused in the act of tying a yellow sash round the hot-water can, "when I look at what people send it makes me think that charity's giving away what they don't want."

The next morning I met Maria again at the greengrocer's. It is her opinion that if you put your whole trust in a greengrocer and send him your orders by the civil young man who calls in the morning, he is likely to send you the most ineligible of vegetables. So she goes herself.

She poked at a young cabbage and said that she had nearly lost her faith in human nature. Whether this had anything to do with the cabbage I could not make out. I had, indeed, some difficulty in disen-

tangling her remarks to the grocer from those intended for me.

"I simply will not have a wilted cabbage," Maria said to the long-suffering tradesman who abjectly took her orders.

"And just think what Mrs. Dillbinkie did! I told you that she had bought two shilling tickets from me for the costermongers? No, Mr. Gow, don't you offer me a speckled cauliflower; it's full of flies! I got a letter from her by first post this morning and I haven't done trembling yet. Spring rhubarb? It has no substance, Mr. Gow—cooks to nothing. Tuppence? No wonder people are anarchists. Well, send me a bundle; though it's too dear. And what do you think she wrote!—the amount of cheek and violet powder in that letter you wouldn't believe—that, as she had taken two tickets from me, she expected me to take two tickets from her for a concert she is getting up for the Mayfair home for destitute cats. And she enclosed them. No, I can't afford new potatoes now for the whole family, but I'll take a pound just to try, and I hope this time," she added with awful emphasis, "you'll give me good weight. And as she's making up a purse to present to the Princess—there's more dirt than I like about your celery, Mr. Gow, as I have told you before—would I send the two guineas by return post. Isn't it too dreadful!" and Maria spoke in a hollow voice.

"And what is there to pay, Mr. Gow? One and

three pence ha'penny? I've been shaking ever since. To have the cheek to ask for two guineas in return for two shillings! Not obliged to take them? My dear, you don't know what it is to be a mother; she gives such smart dances. Send it? Why, of course. You don't expect me to carry home all those vegetables? If I don't take them she'll never invite Diana. Besides, she lives on the right side of the Park. Misunderstood you, Mr. Gow? Don't apologise, only send them at once. But there is nothing a mother won't do for her child. Such impudence! Two guineas for two shillings. I call it stealing. There, do come home with me; I'm all upset."

Maria enlightened me greatly as to the ways of charity; the ways of charity being devious and illusive. And she took away all my illusions about patronesses. Maria assured me that the cheapest way to be charitable is to be a patroness. Patronesses ask other people to buy tickets, but no one would ever dare to ask a patroness to buy one. All that is required of her is her name, and even that comes back to her sooner or later in free tea.

But of course, Maria admitted, one has to be very great or on the point of arriving to be made a patroness. A patroness always starts at the foot of the list with the etceteras, and works her way up. Mrs. Dillbinkie's foot was on the lowest rung of the social ladder, but it was certainly there. Hitherto she had been lumped among the etceteras, but now

for the first time her name was mentioned among the charitable. "At the foot, but there," and Maria sighed.

How I did wish Maria was a patroness, even if only an etcetera!

"Do come to the costermongers," Maria pleaded. She was in painfully low spirits. "I should be so mortified if there was nobody there to talk to us; but people in charity are as cliquey as they are at dances. And Diana's got a sweet new dress, and it's surprising how thin she is growing; I don't know what's got into her. And she's forever skating at Prince's. And as for poetry? Not a single word of poetry for ages. Haven't you noticed how thin she's getting? I'm sure it's the skating. And I used to worry so for fear she'd be a poet, or too stout, or know too much. And it's so hard to get rid of a girl if she knows too much. After she is married it's of no consequence; but before, it scares the young men. I always knew more than Samuel, but it took him years to find it out."

I met Diana on the stairs and for the first time I saw that she had features and a waist. It was a startling discovery.

"How old are you, Diana?" I asked, as I followed her into her bed-room. The battered school-room table had given place to a small white one with weak legs; in fact the room was as much transformed as Diana. It was all white with pink roses. I sat down

on a white sofa with pink silk cushions and looked critically at her.

"Seventeen. Growing old," Diana replied.
"Wasn't I funny when I used to write poetry and wear the old red and green plaid?"

"Don't you write any more poetry?" I asked.
As if I didn't know.

"Haven't any time to write. It takes so long to wave my hair and make calls, and go out; and then there's my skating. That takes all the morning. And I used to waste so much time trying to find rhymes, for I was ashamed to write blank verse; it's so easy."

"You have grown thin, Diana! What's the matter with you?"

"Matter? Why nothing. The idea!"

Whereupon she cuddled down beside me on the sofa and played with my purse chain.

"I want to ask you something," and she twisted it very tightly.

"I do want to ask you something," she repeated and untwisted it again. "I wonder if you ever saw—that is, I wonder if you ever met—but of course if you ever had you couldn't forget."

"Forget what, child?"

But instead of answering she hid her face against my shoulder and put an end to further confidences by clapping her hand over her mouth.

"Nothing—it's nothing; and even if I told you,

you'd be sure to tell mother. But there isn't anything, really." And instantly I felt sure there was, and consequently wondered.

"Now you'll promise not to tell mother," and Diana hugged me in a way ruinous to my clothes.

And although I tried my best to find out, there was really nothing to tell Maria. Nothing.

So I went away meditating on the nature of Nature, and it was in pursuit of further knowledge that I made the costermongers richer by a shilling.

I asked Maria why people don't send their offerings directly to charities instead of dribbling them in through entertainments, and she replied, probably with reason, that it is for the benevolent purpose of giving professional artists something to do.

"They do have such an easy time of it," she said disapprovingly. "And they just love to act or sing or something or other for charity. Gives them something to do. And of course it doesn't cost them anything, and they think then that they are in society and they like that. The piles of money they make! And all they have to do for it is to go to the theatre or play at a concert, or something or other. What's other people's fun is their business. It isn't fair! They get admired, wear loads of diamonds, get invited out, and have big salaries and haven't a thing to do but just enjoy themselves while other people do the real hard work. There's Samuel, sometimes he doesn't come home from the office till eight o'clock,

and then he's awfully cross, especially if there's been a board meeting. And he goes to sleep after dinner, and always hears just what we don't want him to hear. And he snores and when I say he does, he says he has only been breathing hard because of his weak lungs, which he hasn't got. Then, after a whisky and soda, he goes to bed. I don't complain, but it only shows what an easy time actors and people like that have. For if Samuel were an actor all he'd have to do would be to go out after dinner and act and get applauded, and Diana and I could go to all the theatres in London for nothing, and we'd read all about ourselves in the papers and what we wore. No, things aren't equally divided in this world!"

The papers declared that the Costermongers' Bazaar was a triumph of nature. A duchess sat beside a real barrow and sold things, just as in real life. A marchioness in white satin disposed of winkles as if she had been born to it, and there was quite a crowd around her barrow respectfully watching her put her hands at her sides, with her elbows out, as natural as life. Indeed, she scooped out winkles with a pin at a shilling each, and did a thriving trade. There were heaps of imitation costers with monocles, real corduroys and pearl buttons; only too clean to be absolutely correct.

As I came in looking for Maria I was pursued by cabbages, carrots, turnips, shrimps and kippers thrust

at me by realistic amateurs, and I found Maria brooding over her wares in a draughty corner reserved for the socially unimportant. I at once recognised Lord McIntosh's ear-trumpet and Angy Peck's hot-water can tied with yellow satin ribbons. I was pained to see that Maria's wares were still intact, by which I realised that the charitable had passed her by. Diana sat lost behind the ear-trumpet, with a wistful, far-off look in her eyes as if she were praying with all her might that Heaven would send her a customer. She was not made of that well-seasoned timber hardened in the ways of charity; she still showed her feelings.

I had no idea that Maria loved me so much. She greeted me as one greets the rescuer of a forlorn hope. Even Diana began to brighten as she looked towards me. I never saw such a lightning change. The corners of her mouth curved into a smile, and her dark eyes, that had looked so wistfully into the crowd, began to sparkle, and I was immensely pleased at her expression of affection, until she held out her hand past me, and, as I looked over my shoulder, I discovered that the sparkle and smile were not intended for me at all, but for a young man who had come in behind me. He looked at Maria with an uncertain although a very wide-awake eye, but when he turned that same eye on Diana it became shy, not to say pleading. Then he sought moral support in the top of his cane. He was a most orthodox-looking youth, and his blushing face rested on the top of a very tall collar, and his coat

was irreproachable, and so was his hat as he held it before him at the proper angle betraying its immaculate interior.

As for Diana, her transformation was a miracle. She sparkled and smiled, but in comparison to the young man with the cane she took on an elderly, patronising air and proceeded to offer him her most undesirable wares at the most outrageous prices and in a way which can only be described as coquettish. Where had she learnt it?

Maria plucked up a little spirit when she saw the mistaken youth pick up Lord McIntosh's ear-trumpet with serious intentions. I don't really think he knew what he was doing, for he only looked at Diana.

"Goodness gracious, who is he, Maria?" I whispered. What could he want with an ear-trumpet unless he was in that happy state when even ear-trumpets look rosy.

"I don't know, but he must be somebody," Maria whispered back awe-struck. "Probably some one she's met at Prince's."

We heard Diana explain the advantages of the ear-trumpet while he listened vaguely and looked at her with unwinking devotion. Then she asked a price for it which would have been even steep for a duchess.

"For goodness' sake!" Maria gasped as the young man put the thing under his arm and offered Diana a couple of sovereigns.

"Be so good as to introduce me to your mother,"

he said to Diana with a certain decision which even overcame his blushes.

"I—I—quite forgot," and it was Diana's turn to blush crimson. "I thought you knew mother. Mother—I thought I told you—this is Mr. Hicks, mother—you know—Dicky Hicks from Brixton? You remember Dicky Hicks? You used to like him when he was a little boy. Hasn't he grown," cried Diana.

Maria chilled him with the tips of her fingers. I must say he had changed since the days when he wouldn't wash his hands! No wonder we didn't recognise him. He looked reverently at Maria while Maria was undecided whether to annihilate him at once or to wait until he had bought everything he could be induced to buy. The pathos of it was that he was their only customer. Besides, he was a very smart-looking youth, and if he patronised Hockin & Hicks's tailoring department he did them credit. He certainly added an interest to the occasion in which it had been sadly lacking. Maria decided to annihilate him later on.

As for young Hicks, he was quite unconscious of giving offence, and he made engaging efforts to propitiate Maria and to renew his acquaintance with me. And he got so intoxicated under the influence of Diana's smiles that he bought everything he could lay hands on, even the New Art hot-water can and the sanitary tea-pot from Whiteleys, which was still rather sticky, and I wondered how it would ever reach Brix-

ton. All these and more he bought in the joy of his heart, and he announced gaily that he would take all his treasures home in a taxi, and I wondered how he would feel when he examined them by the sober light of the next morning? For of course he would know.

Young Hicks paid his heavy indebtedness and even then he hadn't the stamina to tear himself away. But he had bought so much that the eyes of the adjacent barrow ladies turned to him with alluring smiles, and the more enterprising skipped over and tried to tempt him to buy foreign produce. But even Maria was touched by the way he remained faithful to us.

He couldn't be made to go, and just as he was on the point, I felt sure, of making a bid for the barrow, Maria brought him back to reality by bestowing on him a fermented smile and two fingers that had been on ice for a week at least.

"Good bye, Mr. Hicks. Thank you for buying so much. I'm afraid you would have done better in your own shop."

Considering what he had spent, this was most cruel. But I was so loyal to her that I rejoiced to see the emptiness of her barrow, and I was really grateful to Dicky. I don't know what Diana was.

As he disappeared burdened with parcels which he occasionally dropped, it was instructive to observe the change in Maria's face as she turned to Diana. Diana was looking at nothing in particular with an

absent-minded smile, and winding forgotten yellow satin ribbon with great care around her finger.

"The impertinence of buying so much," and I cannot describe how Maria's eyes flashed. "What did he do it for?"

"For charity, of course," said Diana smiling to herself, and I observed that she had what is infinitely more original than two dimples, she had one dimple. Now no one can have one dimple without a sense of humour, or what would be the use of it. At the same time I asked myself: "Where do girls learn things?"

The next morning I found Maria full of charity—I mean full of the bazaar.

"Charity," she said, "is frightfully expensive. It's wonderful how little remains. We only made eighty pounds."

"That's not bad in these hard times. I didn't think you'd make so much."

"But, you see, the expenses have to be paid out of that."

"And how much are they?" I asked with a good deal of curiosity.

"Of course they were kept down, or they might have been more. They're eighty-five pounds. Very little, considering. And you'll be glad to know," she added with a stately air, "that my barrow took in more money than any except, of course, the Duchess's."

I had a pathetic vision of Dicky Hicks and his empty trousers-pockets in the sobering light of day.

"It really would have been a great success," said Maria, "if it hadn't been for young Hicks and the way he hung about. So noticeable! And so impertinent of him to have bought so much. Forcing himself on us! But I've made up my mind I simply won't be pursued by Brixton. There!"

A vast problem has haunted me ever since; whether the costers wouldn't have done just as well if there hadn't been any bazaar? But of course Diana wouldn't have done nearly so well.

XV

MARIA AT THE PIRATE CONCERT

MARIA described the capture of her two guineas by Mrs. Dillbinkie as nothing short of highway robbery. She thought, however, that she could get even again—presumably with charity—by putting nothing into the collection plate for a long time, and that filled her with resignation. She invited me to go with her to Mrs. Dillbinkie's pirate concert instead of Diana, who wouldn't go because she was just learning to waltz at Prince's. Diana was devoted to Prince's, but she refused to let us see her skate until there was no chance of her falling; which seemed reasonable.

"I should tumble if mother only looked at me," she said to me. And I quite understood. Maria is so destructively critical.

I was surprised that Maria took a four-wheeler to Mrs. Dillbinkie's concert at the Ritz, Mrs. Dillbinkie of all people! But, as she explained, there would be sure to be so many carriages there that the hall-porter—a very great man—couldn't possibly know in what she had come. Then, too, in a four-wheeler one knows just what one has to pay, but not in a

taxis. Taxis, she had discovered, get into blocks as the sparks fly upwards, and it is most trying to see the meter register madly while the taxi stands still. Besides, as the machine registers everything under the sun, she felt it was impossible for a mere human taxi-cab to go to the Ritz except by way of Islington. She was sorry to say that she invariably observed this failing in taxis, and it so wore on her that she always arrived in a state of nervous prostration. Indeed, the way in which the tuppences registered themselves savoured of abysmal duplicity and prevented her from enjoying the loveliest scenery.

She was quite right about the porter at the Ritz. There was the usual tangle of carriages, so that Maria was half way up the scarlet runner under the colonnade before that stately creature, usually the fountain-head of worldly wisdom, became aware of her; nor could he have known that she came in a four-wheeler or he would certainly not have waved her to the great glass doors with the respect he did. But, of course, Maria had on her best clothes, and there was about her a stately consciousness of having paid two guineas for her tickets. In my enthusiasm I told her that I had never seen her look so well behind.

Maria pointed out to me that to gain universal respect, one must impress servants; in a way, she thought, they were the only people worth impressing. But, she said, one could only do this by being either very smart or very shabby; no half measures.

"Be very smart and they think you may be some one, but if you are very shabby they are sure you are—or you wouldn't dare."

But, as she acknowledged, only the rich and great can afford to be shabby. Another way to gain respect, especially in a smart crowd, she added, is to stare through everybody as if they were empty air, and, at the same time, to push unobtrusively with your elbows out, so that it hurts. So true was Maria to her principles, and so satisfied was she with her clothes, that she stared through the fattest and stoniest dowagers as if they didn't exist, and although she pushed and they looked furiously back, they only encountered her serene face under her very best hat.

It was owing to Maria's wise use of her elbows that we got two nice seats in the middle of the hall, and she settled herself comfortably and smiled as only a woman can who has a blameless conscience or who has on a very good dress, and she bowed graciously in various directions, not because she recognised any one, but because it looked well. I quite understood.

"Do you know what I've heard?" she whispered, "that Mrs. Dillbinkie is paying for the whole thing. She's made up her mind to get there, and she thinks charity will do it; so she doesn't care how much it costs." I recognised the note of admiration in Maria's voice.

The audience, a female one, distributed itself over the gilt chairs, while Maria directed my attention to the lavish floral decorations.

"Must have cost a fortune! Think of lilaes in January! Well! Just look at her curtsey to the Princess! And nobody really knows where she came from."

And indeed it was instructive to watch Mrs. Dillbinkie, tall and willowy and enveloped in a diaphanous creation, fall softly prostrate at the feet of a Princess of the House, and then float beside that great lady towards a stately red and gold arm-chair. As I knew quite well that she had started on the wrong side of the Park, and never faltered in her progress until she had cut all her old friends dead, and then landed in Mayfair in an electric brougham, I was really filled with an ungrudging respect for that plucky creature.

"I wish I knew if all these people have bought tickets," Maria sighed; she was very subdued. I could see she was deeply impressed by the way that Mrs. Dillbinkie ignored her. She was full of unspeakable anguish, and it had cost her two guineas. I felt for her. She turned her eyes away from the painful sight of Mrs. Dillbinkie offering her Princess a white satin programme, and curtseying before her like a fainting water-lily, and discovered Lady Tippett in her usual rusty black, looking about for a seat. Maria caught her wandering eye and motioned rather too eagerly to the vacant chair beside her. There was no

doubt that Lady Tippett was shabby, but she had a title, and Maria was feeling forlornly shut out from the aristocracy. Possibly to offset Lady Tippett's monumental shabbiness she called her by name rather oftener than was strictly necessary. But that was only natural.

"Have you paid?" Lady Tippett asked rudely.

"Of course I have paid," and Maria looked superior.

"Have you really? What a waste of money. She sent me two tickets. I'm only using one, for my daughter wouldn't come. She's more interested in children than destitute cats. However, I don't believe even the cats will get much," and she used a big pocket-handkerchief, the kind Maria would only tolerate in the aristocracy. Maria turned pale, not only because it was a waste of money, but because it manifestly proved that Mrs. Dillbinkie did not consider her socially important.

An orchestra hidden in a grove of palms played sweetly, and everybody talked. There were the usual deluded artists who had given their services in the forlorn hope that it might lead to something else. A violin lady with a silk pad and a meek accompanist, a stout contralto who produced "The Lost Chord" out of her inner consciousness, and a tall, thin soprano who caroled "The Jewel Song" out of "Faust" high and shrill among the waving feathers of her hat; also a baritone with a rolling eye, a fierce moustache and his hair *en pompadour*, who bowed

so low that one could see just where he was getting bald.

Even the Princess applauded, and Mrs. Dillbinkie floated about among the *élite* and smiled with an air of conscious triumph.

I saw that Maria was quite crushed. Still she made a heroic effort to rally.

"What a lovely creature that is; the one just in front there," she said in a momentary release from music, "so quiet, so elegant, and so high-bred." By which Maria gave us to understand that she disapproved of the smartness of the charitable.

Lady Tippett reconnoitered through a pair of steel-bowed spectacles.

"Where?" and she tried to dodge the picture-hats.

"That lady? That one? Why, bless me! that's my cook," she exclaimed. "Nice looking, isn't she? But I do wish she wouldn't give Sir Peter so much curry. Wonder if she's enjoying herself? But how ever did she get her ticket?" and Lady Tippett rubbed her nose in meditation. "There! Now I remember! I heard they even threw the tickets down the areas to make sure of a good audience."

I never saw such a change as came over Maria. She was transfigured.

"Really?" and she gave a sigh of happy relief. "D'you know, I thought the audience looked a bit mixed. Still, it is a sweet concert, isn't it? But it must have cost her a fortune. I wonder if the cats

will get anything? But I dare say the Princess will invite her to something or other. Still, I shouldn't think it was worth it! So many all sorts of people do get invited nowadays," and Maria shook her head as if nothing would induce her to go even if she were invited. I never said that Maria was consistent. But how she did regain her spirits! She even forgave Mrs. Dillbinkie.

"So charitable, isn't she? But I don't think it'll really pay her. You must be sure and let me know if your cook enjoyed it, dear Lady Tippett? What a nice-looking creature she is."

Maria was full of charity as we emerged under the colonnade, although we were jostled by other people's footmen. A poor creature with a baby smothered in a dirty shawl on one arm, and a basket of very wilted flowers on the other, abjectly hovered on the outskirts of the charitable, and the baby slept as peacefully as if the dirty shawl were a royal cradle. In the crowd of smart women, footmen, motors and carriages, she begged unmolested, and I realised how full Maria was of perfect peace when I saw her drop a penny into the dirty outstretched hand. "Mind," she said severely, "don't you spend it in drink."

Whereupon Maria turned to me and shook her head. "Besides," she said, "I don't believe it's a moral baby anyhow."

For a moment Maria stood undecided under the colonnade. Then she spoke:



AFTER THE PIRATE CONCERT
(LEAVING THE RITZ)

"Come to Rumpelmayer's and have tea." By which I realised the importance of the occasion, and that it was to be a kind of *Te Deum* tea.

"Fancy being obliged to ask cooks to come to one's concert!" and she smiled so radiantly that the polite policeman, who escorted us across St. James's Street, smiled back at her. But he made a mistake; it was not intended for him.

XVI

MARIA ON AT-HOMES

MARIA talked it all over with me. She said she really must do something or other so that people would know that Diana was "out."

Hadn't I observed the change in Diana? It began when she threw "Boadicea" in the waste-paper basket, and gave up the red and green plaid shawl. Now Madame Antoinette had succeeded in reducing Diana's waist measure to twenty-five inches and she held out hopes of further reductions, for Diana was fearfully keen on skating.

The knell of the red and green plaid shawl had long since sounded, and I knew Diana had given up poetry and I was sorry, although it certainly was very bad poetry.

Maria explained that she would like to give a dance, only a dance costs so much, and she couldn't be sure that the right people would come.

"People are so mean," and she was very despondent, "they always accept, but they throw you over if anything better turns up. Then the young men require heaps of champagne or they won't dance, and the champagne has to be good, at least at the begin-

ning. And I should hate to have nobody come and have the waiters drink up the champagne, and the Blue Hungarians play to empty rooms. It would be so mortifying.” Which is true.

So Maria decided on giving an at-home, as being the safest thing in cheering and inexpensive hospitality.

“All I shall need is tea and things, and some kind of a little entertainment. But first I shall go about and see just how it is done, and you must go with me. Diana is of no earthly use, for she thinks everything is lovely.”

I must say Maria is ever so nice about taking me to entertainments that cost nothing, like weddings and funerals and teas; and just then, luckily, Lady Tippett sent out cards for her yearly at-home to the friends who are not worth asking to dinner.

The prevailing note of the Tippett’s house is gloom, possibly accentuated by a collection of death-masks about which Sir Peter is very keen, and which he uses as a household decoration.

Lady Tippett is always dressed in mourning even without any reason; to be ready. She is great on jet and mourning rings, and on her right forefinger she wears the miniature of a brown lady weeping over a black urn.

Miss Tippett’s name is still on her mother’s visiting cards and has been there for a discouraging number of years; so, naturally, Lady Tippett does not

approve of other people's daughters. Miss Tippett is a thin, serious girl with loads of sandy hair and low, flat heels.

Lady Tippett's drawing-room is long and dark, and two early Victorian chandeliers give but a sulky light. The company consisted of Indian relics of the various services, and Maria drew my attention to the way in which the male relics, on arriving, vanished with Sir Peter into his study where he keeps an extra fine brand of Scotch whiskey, and out of which they all emerged with red faces and bulging eyes. They called it tea. The female relics wandered into the dining-room, and such as were strangers stared at each other forbiddingly over the rims of their tea-cups. It was a funereal room with a sideboard like a tomb, and at each end a knife-stand like a cinerary urn, and under it a cellaret in shape not unlike a baby's coffin. The death-masks overflowed in a frieze around the room. Over the mantel-piece was a print of Joan of Arc, in a helmet like an early Victorian bonnet, placidly cutting down her enemies. On the whole the room was conducive to melancholy, and the tea was cold.

As I drank cold tea I saw that Maria had seized even this unfavourable opportunity to exchange cards with a new friend in crape and crape flowers, and just as I was meditating on her genius for friendship, the sound of music penetrated in a strangled way through the ceiling.

"Something's going on upstairs. Come 'long!" and she crowded past me.

The drawing-room was full of ladies on camp-stools, and even the male relics had been lured up by music and now plastered the walls, staring hard. The back drawing-room was evidently reserved for something special, for on an oasis of carpet stood a cottage piano with a green chest-protector, and here sat Lady Tippett with her back to her friends, and she struck chords of a dismal nature out of the yellow keys. The audience looked on with resignation while she thumped away with serene self-confidence, until the back drawing-room door opened and Miss Tippett appeared, and we all held our breath as it dawned on us that the skirt-dance had only now penetrated to the Tippetts, for there stood Miss Tippett in a blue accordion pleated skirt, a baby waist, and her sandy hair unbound and flowing all over her. Then Miss Tippett lifted the blue accordion and Lady Tippett pounced on the yellow keys as a vulture on his prey, the result being a cross between the "Old Hundredth" and a Victorian waltz, and partaking of the nature of both.

How the old boys against the wall stared while Miss Tippett pirouetted over the carpet in time to the wailing of the piano, and even made a tentative effort to raise her toe to the chandelier! They murmured loud approbation; they liked it. And while Lady Tippett finished with a few sacred chords, the old boys got so demoralized that they clamoured

for more, and applauded so violently that the ladies on the camp-stools felt quite uncomfortable. They didn't know what to do. The skirt-dance in the bosom of the family was an innovation which they did not know whether to encourage or not. Miss Tippett, hitherto considered a model of propriety, seemed to harbour possibilities for evil. Maria looked out of the corner of her eye at Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones sat in a big green and gold arm-chair reserved for the *élite*. She would be guided by her; she ought to know.

"Dear me," said that great lady breathing very short, "I wish I could do it!" And on the strength of this Maria sailed over to Lady Tippett who was collecting the compliments.

"So charming—so—so swanlike," Maria cooed. "So nice to have a new kind of talent in one's family. Such a pleasant change from music."

"Yes, music is getting so common," Lady Tippett assented. "I hope I don't play like a professional? It's so vulgar, and so many people do. I always tell my daughter that whatever she does she mustn't dance like a professional. Whatever music is it ought to be ladylike. I hope it was ladylike. It's dreadful these days, but there's really no telling an actress from a lady. Good-bye."

We got into a 'bus because Maria said it didn't matter if the Tippetts's man-servant did see us; he was only a foreigner.

"One has to be so careful about home talent," Maria said as the 'bus started and we fell into a seat. "It does very well for the poor who can't help themselves and who don't know any better, but it's a little too much to ask people who aren't suffering to sit on those horrid camp-stools and look at home talent. Of course people have got to be entertained, for it's awful the way they stare if nothing's going on—but when it comes to home talent I think it's too dangerous. But what a mercy it is we've got the Blue Hungarians! It's the only thing that ever makes people talk."

In the course of her studies of "at-homes" Maria took me to Mrs. Dillbinkie's in a taxi-cab, which made me realise the importance of the occasion. There are some people on whom it is impossible to call in a four-wheeler; Mrs. Dillbinkie is one.

"It's after all a good deal like a private motor, and Mrs. Dillbinkie now only has motor friends," Maria explained. The new class distinction being, according to Maria, that nice people have motors; other people haven't.

We wedged our way through picture-hats and frock-coats, but the little dining-room was so crowded that we resigned ourselves to going tea-less upstairs, and Maria gave our names to the page-boy who flung them into the drawing-room with a shrill shout that seemed to accentuate their unimportance.

Mrs. Dillbinkie welcomed us with her immaculate

back, nor did she pay any attention to the shout of the page-boy for she was talking soulfully with a little black moustache, two foreign eyes, two resplendent cuffs and a hat of a most peerless gloss held by a lavender kid glove.

"The Count!" and Maria took a tragic breath and we waited patiently until Mrs. Dillbinkie vouchsafed to turn and offer us a single "how do," which we had to divide between us; then she smiled vaguely over our heads, and again turned her back.

"I insist on your standing beside me, Count," and she rolled her great dark eyes at him, "for I want you to meet my dear friend Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones."

The Count had started forward to greet Maria who looked entreatingly at him, for after all he was her Count, ruthlessly captured by Mrs. Dillbinkie. I wondered how the Count would interpret Maria's glance; it is so hard to understand the intricacies of the foreign mind. I observed that he divided a smile of conscious complacency between Maria and Mrs. Dillbinkie, as if he realised that in some way he was to be the prize of the stronger lady. He looked gratified, and bowed and smiled and shrugged his shoulders; still he kept close to Mrs. Dillbinkie, although Maria tried to lure him towards a couple of gilt chairs still vacant in the front row.

Mrs. Dillbinkie's little drawing-room was full of gilt chairs occupied by picture-hats, dowagers and lorgnettes.

Maria and Mrs. Dillbinkie both looked at the Count — Maria's glance pleaded eloquently for him to come with her. But the Count was strong with the strength of inertia, and so Maria relinquished him to Mrs. Dillbinkie and wedged her lonely way to one of the two gilt chairs in the front row and sat down. It was heroic. I lingered by the door while Mrs. Dillbinkie flew after Maria and fluted into her ear like a dove that had lost its temper: "I'm sorry, but these chairs are reserved for my dear friend, Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones."

"Well, she can't sit in more than one," said Maria, "and if you don't mind I'll wait till she comes. Don't you remember, you first met her at my house?" What Mrs. Dillbinkie was going to say she never said, for just then the page roared:

"Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones!" and a stout body forced itself disastrously through the narrow space.

"I'd reserved a seat for myself next to you," and Mrs. Dillbinkie purred a suffering purr at the great lady, "but it's been taken by Mrs. Smith, and she won't give it up." If Mrs. Dillbinkie's glance had been dynamite, Maria would have been hoisted out of the gilt chair; but, luckily, it was not dynamite. So Maria sat there quite unmoved and smiled a gratified welcome to Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones as she sank down beside her.

I did not mind Maria's having forgotten me and I clung with all my might to the door while the most

ethereal elbows tried to push me away. It is really impossible to judge of the sharpness of elbows by an angel smile.

Mrs. Dillbinkie hovered over Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones and ignored Maria.

"I've got a sweet entertainment; I thought of you when I engaged the artist. It's all nature, for I know you adore nature. Lady Biddy Tompkins discovered him at Brighton; on the sands. And she says he's sure to make a sensation. And it's so lovely to get something new these days. Do let him pass!" she urged with some asperity, for the picture-hats in the doorway blocked the entrance of the artist of the sands.

He was a sleek man with shiny black eyes and a fierce black moustache against a dappled blue cheek. He wore shiny evening clothes and a very low collar with deep points, and a white waist-coat edged with black. He carried a banjo and established himself on a gold chair at the very feet of Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, in the favourite banjo attitude with one leg in a vivid zebra stocking over his knee, and tinkled his instrument into tune. And as Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones feebly tried to push her chair back, he began with a voice strengthened by daily competition with the English Channel:

"Hi, sy, Eliza, do you love me?
Do you love me, sy?"

Mrs. Dillbinkie turned faint, and well she might,

for Eliza was Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones's own name, and Eliza was the refrain to the fifteen stanzas of this ditty. And between the verses the artist leaped up and danced the jig so popular at seaside resorts, until the drawing-room shook and Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones watched him with resentful eyes and clutched Maria for support. And then Maria turned and sent an imploring glance to the Count wedged in the doorway. What did Maria mean by that glance? Did she expect the Count to plunge through the gilt chairs and the picture-hats, and slay the artist? She did not know herself.

Even Mrs. Dillbinkie wrung her hands in the doorway. "He must be stopped!" she wailed, and flew to her husband who stood on the landing, grinning. He liked it.

"I told you not to engage him without hearing him first," and her voice shook, and she stamped her foot.

But this time the long-suffering Mr. Dillbinkie turned. "I say!" he remonstrated, "if that isn't cool! When it was you who got him!"

Mrs. Dillbinkie would have retorted, only the page-boy was listening for all he was worth.

"If you don't stop him I shall die!" and she did something to his arm. Her long, thin hands were like steel claws. He bounded forward, but the artist, conscious of his success, was already well advanced in another ballad, in which he portrayed a too exhilarated "Tommy" making love to a shy cook

through the area railings. It was his greatest "hit." But with the feeling of the true artist he subdued his intoxication to the size of the drawing-room, and in his evident truth to nature he only allowed himself to lurch against the piano once, but he upset a vase of roses and the water trickled slowly into the instrument.

It was just then that Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones rose, followed by Maria.

"She feels a little faint," Maria explained softly to Mrs. Dillbinkie who received them with anguish.

"That horrid man," and Mrs. Dillbinkie nearly sobbed, "and Lady Biddy so refined! And I told you," and she turned on Mr. Dillbinkie with the reproach of a martyred dove, "not to engage him until you had heard him yourself."

The Count had nobly answered Maria's imploring glance, though he did not know what she wanted but he stood on the outskirts smiling with uncomprehending affability.

"Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones wants her car," Maria fluted to Mrs. Dillbinkie, "and perhaps the Count will kindly give her his arm," and she looked at him.

He offered his arm gallantly to the suffering lady and helped to hoist her panting into her car. Mrs. Dillbinkie wailed to Maria over the bannisters:

"To sing a song about Eliza! Wasn't it dreadful!"

"His style is perhaps too broad for the drawing-room, and dear Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones is so sensitive,"

Maria murmured softly as she prepared to follow the sufferer. "I've promised to see her home. G'bye, dear Mrs. Dillbinkie. It was such a lovely entertainment."

Maria sat down in triumph beside Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, while the Count still stood hat in hand, with that continental courtesy which rises superior even to a cold in the head. Then Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones wheezed a remark to Maria, who conveyed it to the Count. He bowed with abject continental gratification and climbed in after them, and then with a dramatic snort and shiver, Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones's car was off.

I went upstairs again and felt quite sorry for Mr. Dillbinkie who would have no one that night to shield him from Mrs. Dillbinkie's conversation. I found the sand artist putting the last touches to his area romance, just as Mr. Dillbinkie plunged through the agitated picture-hats and interrupted him as he was whispering fond, intoxicated nothings to the cook and she was, apparently, taking a shy refuge behind the ash-bin.

"You must be tired," and Mr. Dillbinkie slipped his hand through the artist's shiny, broadcloth sleeve, "come down and have a drink. Not tea."

I quite admired Mr. Dillbinkie.

"There's four verses more," the artist remonstrated, "and the lidies ain't 'eard the best," and he winked a coal black eye.

"The ladies must not be selfish," and Mr. Dillbinkie forced the unwilling artist before him down-stairs, through a crowd of shrinking picture-hats, who thereupon sat down on the gilt chairs and stared vaguely about. Finally a young thing, with a big lorgnette and in a bower of waving plumes, shook her head and took a long breath.

"How deliciously primitive," she exclaimed. We felt she had saved the situation. And as everybody took leave of Mrs. Dillbinkie I heard them say:

"How deliciously primitive. So kind to ask me. Thanks awf'ly. G'bye."

When I saw Maria the next day to talk it all over she remarked that the English are curious about foreigners; the only things they like foreigners to do for them is to sing and to cook, and I agreed to the underlying truth of this statement.

"I suppose there must be foreigners in the world," Maria conceded, "if only it's to prove how lucky we are. Give me an English footman, but I must say," she added with a broad sense of justice, "give me foreign music." I again agreed with her.

"Mrs. Dillbinkie should not have engaged British talent. If that horrid man had been just as nasty or nastier in French or Italian we should all have liked it because we wouldn't have understood. But it's a lesson to me. I've already been to Whiteley's about it. I'm going," and she looked hard at me, "I'm going to hire a foreigner. A foreigner from

Whiteley's. He is," and she paused to note the effect, "he is an African king."

"Dear me," I said dubiously, "what does he do?"

"He sings his native songs and dances war dances in his native costume."

"Do be sure about his costume," I urged, "some African kings, I am told, wear only a necklace."

"The young man at Whiteley's," and Maria was quite annoyed, "assured me that the costume could not offend the most fastidious. They made it."

"But is your back drawing-room large enough for a war dance?" I asked, my other doubts being set at rest.

Maria assured me that the African King performed in the most exclusive and narrowest drawing-rooms in Belgravia. She added that Uncle Titecomb was so interested in the African King, in whom he hoped to see again an old *protégé* of his, a reformed cannibal, that he had offered to pay his fee. Further Maria said she meant to have an awning put up over the leads behind the little greenhouse on the first landing, where people could retire and smoke and look at the mews. She would have rugs, a few chairs and plants and claret-cup put there, and it would make a charming retreat out of the crowd.

"Of course a great deal of soot falls down there," she admitted, "but nobody'll know until they get home. The African King will dance in the back drawing-room, and he brings a young person to play

his accompaniments. He wants a platform, but I told Whiteley's young man that he couldn't have one as there wasn't room enough. What kind of refreshments do you think are the cheapest for an at-home? I can hire a big frosted cake for the middle of the table, the kind that no one would dare to cut. But they look so much. I'm told," she added thoughtfully, "that they are made of plaster. But no one expects anyone to come to an at-home and make a dinner of it, do they? And what do you think about ha'penny stamps on the invitations?" she asked anxiously.

I said that it was my firm conviction that ha'penny stamps take off the bloom from an occasion. They set a too economical pace.

"I dare say you're right," Maria assented, "I've noticed it myself. Of course ha'penny stamps do for bills or missionary meetings and other tiresome things. But to think that the Government could do it at half price and won't. Isn't it mean! However, I know what I'll do! I'll put a penny stamp on the invitations of the people who count. I don't mind the rest."

When I got my invitation there was a ha'penny stamp in the corner. So like Maria,

XVII

DIANA COMES OUT

MARIA'S friends could be broadly classed as the penny and the ha'penny stamps. The preparations were on a sumptuous scale. The Chippen-dale in the front drawing-room had been pushed in a rigid row against the walls, and so had the New Art in the back. In the front drawing-room there was, besides, a nucleus of little black and gilt hired chairs that had suffered on many another festive occasion; these were entirely occupied by penny stamps. In the back drawing-room there was the New-Art piano, and a rather small empty space for the African King. The harp was temporarily banished to Maria's bed-room. The arm-chair with the black walnut grapes stood in a choice position in front, and was occupied by Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. She was in purple, and she breathed hard; a gold bag and many gold etceteras dangled from her fat wrist. Her car, which leaned up against the kerb and conferred dignity on the occasion, breathed just like Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones.

It was gratifying to notice how few four-wheeler friends Maria had, although just as I went in a most

distressing accident occurred. All the Simpson-Blotters, except the last batch of twins, had chartered a four-wheeler, and every one of them came; even the governess. And I felt sorry for Maria for I knew the havoc they would make among the refreshments. Besides Mr. and Mrs. Simpson-Blotter there were two little girls in white frocks and with flaxen pigtails, and a little boy in a sailor suit and an enormous starched white collar, and as they drove up we saw the governess pull them all tidy, while Mrs. Simpson-Blotter smiled widely, quite unconscious that she was only a ha'penny stamp. But just as the aged steed dragged the whole family to the front door, something seemed to give way inside of him, for he collapsed and fell with all his legs outstretched as if he never intended to rise again.

The Simpson-Blotters were rescued, and the driver rolled out of his blankets and by means of threats and entreaties urged his steed to rise again. But the animal seemed to realize the immense power of passive resistance, for there he lay in front of Maria's door and covered the occasion with the awful shadow of the middle-class. The footmen on either side of the front steps grinned, and the only one who struggled manfully with the disaster was a little temporary groom whom Maria had hired for the afternoon. He kicked the prostrate animal and applied other restoratives, while cabbies and chauffeurs gave vent to the vitriolic irony within them. Only the taxis

were filled with unholy joy as they watched their meters register by leaps and bounds.

In the meantime Maria, happily unconscious of the blight on the occasion, stood by the drawing-room door with Diana and welcomed the friends that she knew, as well as the friends she didn't know. It was most instructive to see how she steered the least desirable friends towards the least desirable places, while she kept a watchful eye on the front rows reserved for the exclusive penny stamps. I did not see a single ha'penny stamp in those sacred chairs already occupied by Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, Uncle Titcomb, Sir Peter and Lady Tippett, General and Mrs. Hopper, V. C. (Angie Peck, of course), Mr. and Mrs. Crocker, ex-M. P., Mr. and Mrs. Dillbinkie, the Kiffs, the Pontifexes, and the wife of an ex-Lord Mayor of London.

Maria had forgotten to keep a seat for me, and as I stood in the doorway I rather wished she had thought me worth hovering over, and I felt rather forlorn. As I happened to look back I discovered Samuel quite near, but flattened helplessly against the wall by the onrush of friends. A polite old gentleman, with a white waxed and curled moustache and an eye-glass, was hoisted up the stairs with such violence that he was flung against Samuel, and only regained his footing and his eye-glass with great difficulty.

“I say!” he exclaimed, and stuck in his glass and

stared at Samuel, "I do hope I haven't killed you? I couldn't help myself. Isn't this beastly? But I'm sure we've met before. Do you live in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, I—I live in this house," Samuel replied with all that was left him of breath. "It's my wife's party."

"Great Scott!" said the gentleman, but further conversation was cut short, for he was swept helplessly forward towards Maria. Maria switched on a separate smile of greeting for each guest, which died away with disconcerting abruptness and left a strained and expectant look which suggested that the guest just welcomed was in the nature of a disappointment.

Only one very desirable chair had been left vacant. It was next to Uncle Titcomb who had the place of honour beside Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones. And as I wondered whom Maria expected, the anxious look vanished and her face radiated smiles, and as I turned to see the cause, the Count pushed past me. There was a *soupçon* of benzine—and then he bowed with continental duplicity over Maria's outstretched hand, whereupon she introduced him with an ingratiating company coo to Uncle Titcomb, and then he sat down on the vacant chair among the *élite*.

In a way it is much nicer to be Maria's enemy than to be her friend. For, as she herself says, one knows what one's friends will do, but not one's enemies; so it is safer to be polite to one's enemies. Still I must say

that I felt hurt when I saw Mrs. Dillbinkie sitting among the elect while I, the friend of Maria's childhood, stood first on one foot and then on the other.

As I meditated on the devious ways of friendship there was a flutter, a craning of necks and little squeals, and something big, black and feathery, plunged down-stairs from Maria's lower spare-room and scattered all the ladies who had taken refuge on the stairs. It was the African King.

Uncle Titcomb sat against the converted bed-post with the palm on top: he was in black broadcloth and he looked upon the occasion in the light of a missionary meeting. He had never met a live count before, and he was greatly honoured at sitting next to a man of such exalted rank. Still the Count was a foreigner and he was accustomed to look on foreigners as unregenerate, and with souls in a very bad way. However, worldly considerations triumphed and he engaged the Count in affable conversation.

"What singular clothes he wears," he remarked of the African King. "I hope he is converted," and he pushed his chair rather dangerously against the bed-post. "But I didn't expect it was going to be so like play acting," and he glowered at the unconscious African.

"A vere pitty man, ziz," the Count said politely. He was full of misapprehension, and his black eyes rolled about rather vaguely.

In the meantime Uncle Titcomb looked with ever

growing disapproval at the African King's clothes, which was most unreasonable. What did he expect him to wear? If he thought he was going to wear black broadcloth, no wonder he was surprised, for the African King had on a petticoat and a royal mantle of scarlet feathers and on his head a crown of shark's teeth; and he quite tinkled with bangles. But, as Maria reasonably said, she had no standard by which to judge, and she took it for granted that it was the national African costume. Whiteley's said it was, and they ought to know.

An assistant at the New Art piano performed some African waltzes which seemed not unlike the British variety, while the African King brandished his war spear and uttered some experimental whoops of such a blood-curdling nature, that Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones put her fingers in her ears and the ex-Lady Mayoress closed her eyes. Mrs. Dillbinkie very unnecessarily swayed towards the Count and murmured that she was afraid. But just then the African King, having gathered sufficient momentum, bounded forward and danced the war dance of Africa with such energy that the plaster cast of the Venus of Milo trembled, and the youngest Simpson-Blotter was so scared that she shrieked, and was with great difficulty removed over the heads of the audience to the marquee on the leads, where we could hear her, in the muffled distance, being spanked by the governess who was dying to see more.

On the whole we were relieved when the King placed his spear behind the Venus and announced that he would now favour us with a few love songs of his native land.

By this time we had all, except Uncle Titcomb, got so accustomed to his costume that even Miss Bispho, Maria's vicar's maiden sister—she wore a flat little grey bonnet that looked as if some one had sat on it—watched him with blameless curiosity.

But Uncle Titcomb objected to the tender chord being struck; he criticised the feathers and he said things to Maria, who clasped her hands in uncertainty. She had tried so hard to get something foreign, but was it, possibly, too foreign?

It is so hard to judge of an impersonal love song; but the impression left by the African King's was that the lady of his choice was stone deaf. Miss Bispho liked it, for I saw an ecstatic smile on her face as she gazed at him with her big, pale eyes. Sir Peter liked it because it was something he could really hear. Indeed, in a sudden pause, he shouted to Mrs. Dill-binkie beside him, "I say, that's the way to fetch 'em, eh?"

It penetrated the whole room and Uncle Titcomb was exceedingly shocked.

We were all relieved when the African King announced in his simple way, "I will now sing you 'ome, Sweet 'ome.'" We felt that "Home, Sweet Home," although not strictly African, was at least safe. Even

Uncle Titcomb felt it was safe and he became more cheerful.

We had, however, not reckoned on its being an African "Home, Sweet Home," and it proved to be very exciting. Possibly the King became wild at the recollection of his long-lost country; at any rate he bounded forward so dramatically, between the verses of that familiar song, that Uncle Titcomb pushed his chair back in alarm and so close to the converted bed-post that for a moment the whole structure, with the palm on top, swayed dangerously. But, perhaps, because Uncle Titcomb's time had not yet come, the Count was the chosen instrument of his salvation, for he caught the post and the palm in the very nick of time.

"My dear, dear Uncle!" and Maria flew to him. He looked rather dazed and rubbed the back of his head. "To think you might have been killed but for him!" and she threw a glance at the Count, the blamelessness of which the continental mind could not grasp.

"Ze ole chentlemans mide 'av 'ad a bomp," he remarked, belittling his deed.

"I'll go down and have some tea; I feel rather shaken," Uncle Titcomb said, and retreated before the African King who offered polite apologies.

"The next time, Maria," and Uncle Titcomb was very cross, "you had better get home talent; it's safer." Then he took the Count's arm down to the

dining-room, while Maria followed full of a sudden, soaring ambition. Why not turn Uncle Titcomb into a stepping-stone to higher things? Gratitude is such a bond.

In the dining-room they found Samuel stuffing the three little Simpson-Blotters with sweets, which, even in her agitation, Maria thought unnecessary.

"Think what has happened, Samuel," she cried, as he turned with a guilty start, "the Count has just saved Uncle Titcomb's life!"

Maria could not expect Samuel to be dramatic. He was not dramatic.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged," he said, and rattled the change in his pockets, "and how do you take your tea?"

Poor Maria. Even the Count refused to be dramatic. He only clicked his heels together and bowed, and said he would take his weak with two lumps of sugar. Still Maria made one last dramatic effort.

"I shall never forget," she said in a low, tense voice. "But where is Diana?" for she felt that gratitude would be becoming to Diana.

Then it was that the oldest Simpson-Blotter—they had all been overlooked—aged eight, with two flaxen pigtails, no front teeth and a good deal of chocolate about the corners of her mouth, spoke up. She was bursting with information.

"She th | in the marquee with a man, and ain't they been talking, though!" and she took an inward

breath. "We wath behind the rug playing 'bear,' and they didn't thee uth. We've been there ever thince Anna Frances wath thpanked. He gave uth a penny apiethe to go down to the dinin'-room to thee if he wath there. He'th dreadful funny!"

"Diana is only talking to young Hicks," Samuel explained nervously. "I met him the other day and asked him to come. He is a most admirable young fellow, I assure you. He's only been waiting for a chance to see you, Maria."

Maria looked at Samuel as if he were a terrible revelation.

"Ugh!" she said and shivered in a superior way.

When Diana came in she was blushing and smiling, although I saw nothing to blush and smile about; anyhow, it was the wrong expression.

Maria was so upset that it was with great difficulty she could collect her thoughts sufficiently to reconstruct the drama, especially as Uncle Titcomb stood at the table eating sandwiches, and the Count was sipping tea with an expression of profound prejudice. Even the Simpson-Blotters took the drama out of the situation, for they roved unchecked over the sweets while Maria looked gloomily on.

"If it had not been for the Count," she said sternly to Diana, "your Uncle Titcomb might have been killed." But instead of speaking with the right kind of emotion she looked quite annoyed. "You have much to be grateful for. Thank him," but Maria was

thinking less of the Count and Uncle Titcomb than of Dicky Hicks, and she tried to pierce the culprit with a look. But here Uncle Titcomb interposed pettishly: "I want another cup of tea." He was so tired of this perpetual praise of somebody else, who, after all, was only a foreigner, and at best foreigners are people to whom one sends missionaries. He was most annoyed at Maria for making such a fuss about nothing.

"How glad Uncle Titcomb must be not to be killed," Diana said to the Count, and the Count clicked his heels together and bowed low; when he had nothing to say he always bowed, which did just as well.

I felt that there was something wrong, for the gloom on Maria's face was monumental, so I discreetly went to the window and looked out just as a young man came down the front steps. It was certainly a much maturer Dicky Hicks than the one who had bought so injudiciously at the Costermonger's bazaar. He blushed and smiled as his wide-awake eye caught mine, and he did not even try to hide his disappointment. I was sorry for Maria, for I had a sudden conviction that she was destined to be forever pursued by Brixton.

While I still meditated on the impossibility of circumventing fate, I was joined at the window by Miss Simpson-Blotter, the corners of her mouth ornamented with cream out of a meringue.

"Thath him," and she pointed a sticky forefinger

after the departing youth. "Never thaw any one tho funny ath him!" Here she looked at me with abnormal intelligence, "I'd just love to marry him! I wouldn't marry pa; he's too grumpy. I want to marry thomething funny. But I don't think Diana'll let me marry him; I know. Now I'm going to get a Turkish Delight," and she licked the meringue from her fingers, "I just love 'em."

I think sleep must have lulled Maria's suspicions, for I found her the next day in quite a placid frame of mind. It was her opinion that the Eastern nations are too emotional, and converted bed-posts are not without danger in crowds.

"How dreadful it would have been if Uncle Titcomb had been killed at Diana's coming out. We can't really be too grateful to the Count. So I've asked him to dinner to-morrow. It's only a family party or of course I'd ask you. Uncle Titcomb has taken such a fancy to him; but no wonder. Still I do wish he understood English better. He might want to propose to a girl and not know how," and she seemed quite worried.

"But it was a great success, wasn't it? I don't believe I knew half the people there. And wasn't it crowded! And, after all, that's the main thing. But to think of Samuel inviting that Dicky Hicks! Did you ever! A Hicks of all objectionable people. That's just like Samuel; no social sense whatever. And then for Diana to stand talking to him in the

marquee as if he were somebody. I suppose he felt he had a right to come after bothering us at the bazaar that time. So ill-bred. I gave Diana a piece of my mind. Rather! Still it was a great success, and say what you will there is a style about foreign talent, ain't there? Besides, people do respect things so much more than they don't understand.

"But the idea of the Simpson-Blotters bringing all those children! The impertinence of some people. And you know what the governess did? Cut one of the plaster cakes, and now I've got to pay for it. Just like a governess; no tact. And those horrid children mixed up the sandwich flags so that nobody knew what they were eating. Still, I am glad I did it! I had no idea I had so many friends," she said with dignity. "And, thank goodness, Diana's out! But I do wonder how much I'll have to pay for that cake."

I also wondered a good deal when I left Maria. Was Samuel for the first time in opposition? And was Dicky Hicks the reason that "Boadicea" had ended so ignominiously, and that Diana had developed such a passion for skating?

XVIII

MARIA ON CHRISTMAS

MARIA said that she didn't know of anything quite so perfectly delightful as Christmas. Although, she added, why people are so awfully cross just then she couldn't tell. Shop girls, for instance, seemed to think they were only there to snap people's heads off.

I met Maria and Diana at Whiteley's, and Maria was exhaustively examining penny balls of string.

"Do hurry, mother," Diana said with the impatience of youth, "you've looked at every ball in this shop, I am sure."

"You don't expect me to buy the very first thing I see," Maria replied severely, "anyhow, it isn't what I want. Sorry." And I must say she retreated from the penny balls in good order while she commented on the impatient nature of shop assistants and the joys of Christmas.

"After all it ain't what you give; it's the spirit. Don't push so, Diana. I wonder what we should do without elbows at Christmas," she exclaimed as she collided with an aimless man.

"Suffragette!" and he glared at her and nursed his elbow as she pushed past.

"Rude creature!" and Maria breathed hard. "Peace and good-will indeed! Why, even the penny toys have gone up to sixpence. And yesterday I bought a gutta-percha chicken, the kind that blows up, from a man in the street, and when I got home it wouldn't blow at all; it had a hole in it. So in whom is one to put one's trust? Now I hope you haven't lost the list, Diana! You haven't? Thank goodness! What a mercy Christmas comes only once a year. What's that? "S?" To be sure, Samuel's umbrella. He gets one every year. I have it put in his bill. He does so love a surprise; just like a child. Only I do wish he wouldn't get so low in his mind just at Christmas. Last year he went to Kensal Green to choose a grave, and this year he says he's going to Woking. And he's trying to make up his mind about being cremated. What is the matter, Diana? Very well, go, but mind whatever you buy for me I must be able to exchange it. Don't forget."

"Surprises are lovely," Maria said as Diana darted joyously off, "but one is so sure to get just what one doesn't want. I've told Samuel I'll buy my own this year. Yes, ermine. It's hard not to know what Diana is making for me as she leaves it about and I have to put it away. But next to getting what one wants the best thing really is to get what one doesn't want."

"Why?" I asked in some surprise.

"One can give it away again and that is a saving,"

Maria remarked thoughtfully. "I wish I could give Uncle Titcomb an umbrella, but he's carried his for the last twenty years and he wouldn't carry any other. It's hard to know what to give him. A silk muffler? There, I know, the very thing!" she cried with sudden enthusiasm. "The last time Uncle Titcomb dined with us he said he'd now be obliged to wear a respirator. I remember because the dear Count asked me what it was. He quite dotes on Uncle Titcomb. So I'll get him one; I don't think it'll cost more than two and sixpence."

However, I knew she would weaken, and she did.

"After all I'm not sure I won't give him a muffler, and give Aunt Martha the respirator? It looks more. Or shall I give the muffler to Aunt Martha? Isn't Christmas trying! Last year I sent Aunt Martha a cap and she wrote back that the box had come in bits, and she hoped the next time I sent her a present I'd put enough postage on. People never seem to value the kind thought. And would you believe it if Lady Tippett didn't send me two plaster images painted with that gilt stuff that costs sixpence a bottle. Did it herself, I'm sure. 'Charity and Love' she called them. I at once gave them to cook, and so saved getting her an apron. She was very much pleased and said that although she was only a cook she was glad to say she liked Art. I've got to get some cheap sweets. The kind that aren't dangerous and will do for the poor. For Diana's slum Christ-

mas tree. And what a mercy it is that there are poor," and Maria was overcome by the great Thought, "or what in the world should we do with the things we don't want?"

Here she sank down exhausted at the toy counter. "I've got to buy thirty presents," she said gloomily, "and I shan't get back more than twenty; I've been counting up. Any broken toys that will do for poor children?" Maria asked a hectic assistant. "Dolls with an arm off or sheep that won't squeak, or locomotives that won't go? Sold out? People are so philanthropic. They're quite spoiling the poor. Still it's very lovely, and now that they have iron Christmas trees with electric lights for the poor, it's quite safe. And they don't get into the carpet and set things on fire, do they? I can't help thinking," Maria added thoughtfully, "that there are some things we do better than nature.

"How the women push! Christmas feeling indeed, when people step on one's dress on purpose! Christmas cards, yes.—Now wouldn't you think those horrid women were glued to the counter? They haven't moved for hours. Do let me through, please. *Excuse me,*" she cried with lofty indignation, as she and another woman made a clutch at the same card, "that's my card." "Beg your pardon," the culprit murmured feebly. She was quite exhausted or she would have stood up for her rights.

"Granted," Maria said handsomely, but just then

she turned on a mistaken lady who had stretched her arm over her shoulder in a balked attempt to get a card.

"The impertinence of some people," Maria exclaimed to the world at large. She had collected an enormous pile of cards in front of her.

"All these, madam?" the gratified assistant asked.

"Dear me, no, I only want one," and Maria extended a penny for her purchase.

"Christmas cards are a trial," she remarked as we went to the lift. "People used to be so unsuspecting and never wrote on them, and one could use them again. Not that one did, but one could."

Just as I was meditating whether I ought to tell her that she had sent me back my last year's Christmas card, a gramophone of gigantic dimensions burst into a Christmas carol with disconcerting suddenness. The lift had hoisted us into the piano department.

"Let's sit down and listen," and Maria sighed wearily. "It's so—so soothing and elevating. And my head's in a whirl. Shall I give Aunt Martha the respirator or the muffler? Or which shall I give Uncle Titcomb? And would you give Samuel a silk or a gloria? He'll lose it anyhow. There's no use giving Aunt Martha more because she said she was going to leave everything to the Plymouth Brethren. And Uncle Titcomb won't give me much of anything, but he adores surprises himself. I really think we'd better go. The gramophone is a lovely thing of

course, and so elevating, but I do sometimes wish it would have to take breath."

* * * * *

The next time I saw Maria she was looking distractedly at a pile of things on her morning-room table.

"Do shut the door or somebody'll come in, and Christmas ain't anything if it isn't a surprise. I'm so tired I could cry. Been all over town trying to get a respirator for two and six. All the shops ask three shillings. I've decided to give it to Aunt Martha, for she'd rather have pneumonia than wear one. She's such a dressy old thing. I'll give Uncle Titcomb a muffler. I was just about getting a three shilling respirator when I happened to think of Hockin & Hicks. I'd nearly forgotten Hockin & Hicks! So off I went to Brixton and got it for two and six. Knew I should. I've just come home. Dead tired. It's taken me the whole afternoon. But I've got it. I do hate to be done. What a place Hockin & Hicks is now, and all the wrapping paper plain. So considerate.

"But I'm all mixed up. The only thing I'm sure of is that Samuel is to have the umbrella. No, not silk; gloria. That pink and gold book? That's one of Diana's presents. It'll help to fill up. Not poems. Don't you remember? 'Etiquette.' And that's Uncle Titcomb's Bible; the one that we couldn't

sell at the Bazaar. I'd forgotten all about it. Yes, poor child, also for her. I really can't afford to waste things. I'm afraid she'll be dreadfully disappointed. I wonder," Maria said rather abruptly, "I wonder if you'd like either? No? Why, I always thought you loved books! Then I suppose Diana'll have to have them both. That? That's for the Count. Only a little scarf-pin. I've asked him to dinner on Christmas night and so I must give him something. He's so lonely, far away from home. Pathetic, ain't it. No, not in Westbourne Grove; one doesn't buy for the nobility in Westbourne Grove." Maria was tying a red sash about a china pig filled with sweets and intended for a little Simpson-Blotter.

"It'll be a great thing for her," and Maria stuffed in the sweets.

"Why?" I asked rather perplexed. I really thought she referred to the pig.

"You are stupid," Maria retorted disdainfully.

"What are you talking about?" I asked nettled.

"About the Count, of course."

"I thought you were talking of the pig."

Maria curled her lip, but I could see that she needed a safety-valve.

"He tells me everything, so I know just what he feels. He's told me all about his family. They are very great. He said the first one was a Pope or something or other. He's so proud of being a count, but it isn't a false pride, for he's looking out for some-

thing to do. He says there are possibly too many counts in Italy, and that's the reason he'd rather live in England. He adores England, and all he wants is an opening. He is so sympathetic and poetic and he offered to give us Italian lessons, but Diana says she can't stand his hair oil. So silly of her. Continental people always use hair oil. I wonder if I might tell him? I don't want her to do anything stupid because of hair oil. And he's so subtle, too. Yesterday he told me that some women mature very late; especially if they have never been understood," and Maria sighed.

"That Teddy bear? That's for the Simpson-Blotter twins. It's got to do for both, for I can't give two Christmas presents to what ought only to have been one. Mind, I don't say a word against Samuel. I know he isn't subtle, but he pays all the bills. And yet I can't help thinking," and she shook her head as she picked a chocolate out of the Simpson-Blotters pig which obstructed the lid, "that he has never understood me. In a way I wish I could be his what-d'you-call-'em,—his guiding star."

For a moment I thought she referred to Samuel, but I realised that Samuel needed no guiding star if his balance sheet was all right. So I concluded that it was only the poetic Italian influence, which, interpreted, meant that Maria would try her best to get the Count into Smith Limited.

"His name will look so well on the board of

directors; it'll take away all the middle-class of it. Samuel can drop Sir Peter now. After all, he's only a knight. But you can't know how a mother feels," Maria said rather rudely. "And I think Diana likes him more than she knows. I'm sure she wouldn't like him to go after another girl, and if that isn't a sign I don't know what is.

"And now I want to know," she switched off abruptly, "if you could lend me a dozen forks for my Christmas dinner? The hired ones are so tinny. I wish I could ask you, and I will if some one gives out. But a real friend always understands, or what would be the use of friendship? I didn't dare to ask Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones, because cook said it'd give her nervous prostration if she came. So I've asked Angy Peck instead. And I was so lucky, for the General's got lumbago and can't come. The Count is to sit next to Mrs. Dillbinkie. I had to ask her, for she never invites me to her dinners, so now she'll have to. But I hate her all the same.

"Diana's on the other side of the Count in a sweet new dress. Mrs. Pontifex is next to Mr. Dillbinkie, for I don't need to bother about either of them. She only talks of her daughter and the baby, and he only talks of Mrs. Dillbinkie. I've put Mr. Crocker next to Lady Tippett. He's so improved since he's an 'ex.' And I can't help feeling," Maria said modestly, "that it will be a very brilliant occasion. Diana will look sweet in white lace and roses, and to think that

one day she may be a countess and have it on her visiting card!" and Maria raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"We're to have the presents in the drawing-room after dinner—they'll take the place of music, for, no matter what people say, they do so hate to listen. Now I think of it," and Maria looked thoughtfully at me, "I wonder if you'd like to come in after dinner?"

XIX

MARIA'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

AS I took off my wraps in Maria's morning-room I could hear a buzz of voices, and then a strong whiff of dinner mingled with a blast of conversation as the dining-room door opened. The morning-room was full of wraps, stale dishes and empty champagne bottles. In one corner on a small table stood a big beribboned basket full of little tissue-paper parcels each tied with so much narrow ribbon as to arouse reckless anticipation; the gifts to Maria's guests.

I was chilly with loneliness. Not that I had any illusions about Maria's dinner; I hadn't. She is still in the rudimentary stage of dinner-giving, and follows the dishes with an anxious eye and replies at random when something drops. She also has job waiters and they breathe an aroma of onions into one's ear. There should be a celestial food invented for the sole use of waiters.

The name of Maria's job butler is Barnes, and he waits on the whole neighbourhood, but it is his pride never to recognise any of his other customers, no matter how well he knows them. He is the ancient retainer of a different family every night. Barnes

preceded me upstairs with a grand air, and I was quite persuaded that his ancestors had fought and bled for Maria's ancestors, although he had job-butlered for me only the week before. He flung open the drawing-room door and announced me with a penetrating yet mellow voice, although he knew that they were all in the dining-room drinking Maria's three and sixpenny invalid port. The room was dark except for the fire on the hearth.

I must say it annoyed me to think that Barnes knew that I had only been invited to come in after dinner. It seemed to me as if his respect was tinged with sarcasm, and I declined more light rather shortly. So he poked the fire with respectful aloofness and left me alone with the preparations. They were on a sumptuous scale; wherever laurel and mistletoe could be put they had been put, and Chippendale and the New Art were for once united in a common bond of festooned laurel. Samuel and Diana in oils were crowned with laurels, and mistletoe hung in the proper places.

I pushed Maria's big brocaded arm-chair, with the tall back and the black walnut grapes on top, in front of the fire and gave myself up to irritating meditation as I heard the sound of revelry below, in the course of which I seemed to distinguish Sir Peter Tippett making a speech. I did not expect anything to happen, because in private life nothing ever does happen. But just as I was thinking with increasing bitter-

ness about my forks and the ways of friendship, the door flew open and in swished something long, silk, and dramatic. It was Maria in her best party dress.

"No, no, really, Count, you must go down again," she said, with the playfulness of a prospective mother-in-law who doesn't feel her age, "I haven't a moment to spare. So go down and tell them that Santa Claus isn't ready yet."

"O, Mis' Smiss, sweet, kind Mis' Smiss, I 'ave zat to zay to you—" and as I looked cautiously around the tall back of my chair the Count stood before Maria with his hands clasped in urgent appeal.

I ought to have coughed, but I didn't. Drama is so scarce in real life.

"Is it about Diana?" Maria asked anxiously, "she hasn't——"

In vain the Count struggled to express something he couldn't express.

"I am sure you don't feel well," Maria suggested practically. She believes in physical explanations for all sufferings of the soul.

"O, no—zis is not zat," and he looked piteously at her.

"I'm afraid it must be the plum pudding," Maria said anxiously, "I'll send Barnes up with some brandy. I'm sure a little brandy is just what you need. I thought you enjoyed your dinner," and Maria was quite unconscious of the drama of the situation. "You just wait a minute and Barnes shall bring up

the brandy. I'll keep them down-stairs and you can lie down on the sofa for a few moments," and she swished towards the door.

"Mis' Smiss, Mis' Smiss," he implored, "I will 'ave no brandy—you qvite—qvite mistake. Zis is not zat. O, I am zo—zo, I know not vat"—and the Count flung himself on Maria's hard Empire couch and clutched his nice smooth hair with both his hands. But Maria was already out of the room in search of Barnes, and Barnes came with the brandy and ministered to the Count who was plunged in gloom, but as he sipped, the gloom noticeably lifted.

My mind was full of bits of drama and I asked myself, what did it all mean? Was it possible that the Count preferred Maria to Diana, but could not express his feelings in English? Continental taste is very peculiar!

By the time the Count had finished his brandy he became so cheerful that I wondered if Maria was right. Indeed, when Barnes had left him he was already so far recovered that he hummed the melody of a song made familiar by his native hand-organs. And he smoothed his hair, twisted his little moustache, pulled down his resplendent cuffs and rose as a giant refreshed, just as the door flew open and Diana darted in with a dramatic background of hall light.

She held an open letter and even in the half light I could see that she looked radiant.

"Mees, adorable Mees," and the Count plunged forward.

"O!" and Diana started guiltily and hid the letter behind her. "It's you! I—I thought mother was here. We—we—want to come up."

I didn't dare to cough, and I prayed Diana would not turn on the light.

"Beautiful, adorable mees," and the Count was down on his knees, "I—I lof you. Lof me," and he seized her free hand and covered it with kisses.

"Let me go," and Diana tried to pull it away.

"Be my Contessa," and in the innocence of his inexperience he tried to slip his arm around her waist. "Your muzzer is my vere good friend. She gif you to me. 'Ow 'appy ve vill all be," and he puckered up his red mouth under his little black moustache, and just as I thought it was high time to cough, although I loved the drama of it, Diana gave him a resounding box on the ears, and then stood staring at him conscience-stricken.

"You made me do it, but I'm so sorry!" she cried horrified. "O, I do hope I didn't hurt you! But you, really, shouldn't talk such nonsense."

"O, beautiful Mees," and he held his cheek.

"There! Don't you say that to me again! I won't have it. And please get up!" and Diana backed out of the door, and just as he got up the light was turned on and the ladies trooped in followed by Sir Peter

Tippett, unwillingly torn from Maria's port by the stern eye of Lady Tippett.

They found the Count holding his cheek with one hand and dusting his knees with the other. Although torn from his port Sir Peter was full of seasonable joviality.

"Has the little girl been proposing to you, eh? Proposed to me once," and he prodded the Count in the ribs. "Original, ain't she? But she can't always hope to be refused. I say, what's the matter with your knees? Been down on 'em, eh? And what about your cheek? Too much cheek, eh?"

When Diana came back her hand was tied up.

"What's the matter?" I asked. I had melted into the company unobserved.

"Nothing, nothing. You haven't found a letter? I have lost one I shouldn't like mother to find."

"Really? But what have you done to your hand?"

"I've—I've been scrubbing it with pumice stone, and I scrubbed too hard. That horrid little thing kissed it. I wouldn't have mother see that letter for worlds! You duck! Wherever did you find it? I am so glad!" and she hugged me behind the harp.

The brocaded arm-chair had been pushed away from the fire-place, and Uncle Titcomb stood there instead with his coat-tails parted, taking in all the heat. He kept asking greedily when the presents were coming. Samuel stood under his own portrait listening to Crocker ex-M.P. talking on tariff reform.

For the next wisest person to an M.P. is an ex-M.P. Mrs. Pontifex sat with Mrs. Crocker under Diana in oils and conversed on the relative excellence of babies' underwear.

Angy Peck was in one corner of the sofa near the fire pulling her long gloves on her long arms while her green eyes roamed about in search of a stray man. In the other corner sat Lady Tippett in black velvet and white silk gloves. Her sleeves were of a wrong date. She glowered at Sir Peter who was sidling up to Angy Peck.

Mrs. Dillbinkie trailed about like a soul-hunter in search of prey, and captured the Count who was still suffering from Diana and eager to be captured, and they retired from the world into a New-Art corner where she rolled her eyes at him, and her English was nearly Italian, she cooed it so. Mr. Dillbinkie lingered on the outskirts and smiled like a gratified showman.

There was a tension in the air; we were all waiting for something to happen, and just as expectation had risen to fever-heat the dinner-gong went off with the most unearthly bangs, and as everybody leaped to their feet wondering what had happened, the door opened dramatically and there stood Santa Claus.

Barnes afterwards explained the gong to Maria. It was the third waiter, an inexperienced youth, who had drunk up the remains and, before he could be



MARIA'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

stopped, let out the consequent exhilaration of his soul on the gong.

Everybody was so relieved that Santa Claus was received with tumultuous applause. Of course it was Barnes, and we all agreed to believe that Barnes's ancestors had done this sort of thing for Maria's ancestors. Indeed, there was about Barnes an air of respectful and indulgent sympathy, although Uncle Titcomb looked disapprovingly at Santa Claus's red garments and imitation ermine and remarked that it savoured too much of play-acting for him. Still he fixed greedy eyes on the big basket of parcels that Santa Claus held before him.

As Maria truly says, what would Christmas be without tissue-paper! She even goes so far as to declare that tissue-paper and ribbon make Christmas more than anything else. Santa Claus carried Samuel's umbrella under his arm because it was an awkward parcel for a basket, and what tissue-paper and red ribbon could do had been done. But it is difficult to make an umbrella look festive. Samuel accepted his umbrella in a resigned way and was at once plunged in abysmal gloom which only lifted when Diana hugged him and the umbrella and murmured:

“Dear, dear old dad!”

I must say to Maria's credit that nobody was forgotten. There was a wild scramble to untie ribbons and open parcels, and everybody got all sorts of things they didn't want. And the universal feeling, with

two exceptions, was one of unspeakable disappointment.

Uncle Titcomb radiated anticipation. He sat on the sofa between Angry Peck and Lady Tippett and hadn't knees enough to hold all his little parcels. He couldn't make up his mind to open them.

As soon as everybody had recovered from their presents they crowded around Uncle Titcomb. I had the gutta-percha chicken which wouldn't blow up, for I tried it behind the harp. The Count, too, had recovered his spirits. He had received the noblest present of all, and everybody said, in private, that they wondered at Maria. So pointed.

Mrs. Pontifex whispered to Mrs. Crocker that at any rate the ribbon would come in handy. Insides were apt to be disappointing.

Diana knelt in front of Uncle Titcomb and coaxed him to look at his presents.

"Now you open that first," she urged, "that's from me. I hope you'll always wear it when it's cold. I remembered what you said at the dinner. You know."

And Uncle Titcomb opened it. "Very nice, my dear, very nice," and he patted Diana's cheek. "Thank you for the kind thought."

"What a pretty respirator," and Angry Peck leaned towards him. "Do put it on, it's so becoming," she urged. Uncle Titcomb really had to defend himself from Angry Peck. I always thought she was rather free.

"Dear me, from Aunt Martha!" Diana cried excitedly. "Just think of Aunt Martha's sending you something, and she's written on it, 'I hope it'll be to you what it has been to me.'"

We all craned forward.

But who can get up any enthusiasm about a respirator? Uncle Titcomb couldn't. But we murmured that two would be useful in case one got out of order.

"O, here's something from mother," and Diana was filled with renewed hope, and Uncle Titcomb looked expectant. I heard a rush and Maria flung herself on the milking-stool behind the harp and put her fingers in her ears—as if that would do any good.

"That comes of surprises," said Lady Tippett. "I always say surprises are horrid."

Uncle Titcomb had turned to something like stone, and Angy Peck lay back in her corner and shook.

"It's only because we love you so much, dear Uncle Titcomb," and Diana patted his knee consolingly, "we're all so dreadfully afraid you'll take cold! And here's something from dear old dad. He always gives just what one wants: 'Not pretty but useful.'"

"Don't open it," and Uncle Titcomb's voice sounded hollow.

"Yes, do," all of us entreated.

"O, dear me," and Diana looked helplessly about, "if it isn't two of them!" Here the drawing-room door closed behind Samuel.

"But that's so like dad," Diana cried loyally, "he is so generous."

"You can give them to the poor," said Angy Peck, while Uncle Titcomb glared at her. "But here's something different," and she snatched at a parcel I recognized as my own. "It says 'A friend in need,'" and Angy waved it over her head.

I looked on in resignation while Diana recovered the parcel, and Angy fell back in hysterics in the corner of the sofa. "It's just like my wedding presents, only worse," she gasped. And Lady Tippett clasped her white silk hands and said piously:

"What a mercy that I didn't send him one! I was going to, because of what he said that night at dinner."

There was one parcel left. It looked business-like and was addressed to Signor Titcomb.

"There, don't feel so bad, dear Uncle Titcomb," Diana coaxed. "Now open this yourself. It's a box."

But Uncle Titcomb wouldn't; he glowered at it.

Just then the Count squeezed through; he welcomed the parcel with rapture.

"I sought 'e was forgot! Zis is from me." It is impossible to gauge the obtuseness of the foreign mind. The Count addressed Uncle Titcomb in triumph.

"I 'ear at ze dinnaire zat you want a respiratore. I ask Signora Smiss vat is a respiratore. I go to ze 'potecary. 'E zays. 'I 'ave 'im.' I buy 'im. Zis!"

"You couldn't," and something like satire flickered feebly up in Uncle Titcomb, "you couldn't exchange it for a chest-protector, could you?"

But the Count didn't understand, and he was impervious to the ocular evidence of six other respirators. His was the only one. He tied it on himself and then he pressed it against Uncle Titcomb's mouth, who struggled in vain. Angy Peck put it on, for she is good-natured although she is so free. But Mrs. Dillbinkie fled with little squeaks. She was afraid her powder would come off, I suppose.

Everybody but Uncle Titcomb was in fits of laughter; but Uncle Titcomb's spirits sank too low for words, and finally in the depths of his gloom he shuffled resentfully down-stairs. Barnes helped him into his overcoat and Samuel and Maria put him into a four-wheeler and piled the seven respirators on the seat in front of him. There were seven, not counting the one he had bought for himself and which he fastened over his mouth with obtrusive care. It had an elastic band and buttoned behind.

"We meant to give you such a pleasant surprise," Maria said feebly, "and we all remembered that you said at dinner—"

"I dare say you did, Maria," and Uncle Titcomb glared at her, "I dare say you did. But don't you ever," and his voice behind the respirator sounded quite awful, "don't you ever dare to surprise me again."



Maria brought the forks back herself.

In my excess of sympathy I held out both my hands to her. She looked first at one and then at the other.

"What's the matter?" Then without waiting for an answer she put down the forks. "They are all here," she said as if I doubted her veracity, "only you really might have told me that one of them had lost part of a prong."

"I suppose one of your stupid waiters broke it," was all I said.

"He didn't," Maria retorted. She was out of temper.

"I'm sure he did." I said mildly but firmly.

"He didn't!" Maria seemed bent on quarrelling.

"He did," I repeated, still mildly, I hope.

"He didn't," Maria persisted. So like her.

"Well, never mind."

"Now I suppose you'll lay that up against me forever," and Maria took a long breath. I also took a long breath.

"If there were two Christmases a year I should die," and she flung herself on the sofa.

"I should think you would," I agreed, politely but stiffly.

"Still it was worth the trouble," and she coughed in a chastened way, "and it is a lovely festival; so elevating. Could you give me a cup of tea? I'm awfully tired. Isn't it nice now that they have gramophones to sing Christmas carols at night?

It's such a comfort to think that the poor things can't possibly take cold. I hope you enjoyed yourself Christmas? Everybody said they had such a lovely time and the surprises were delightful. So satisfactory."

I poured out Maria's tea and thought of the prong.

"After all, the main thing was to give them a surprise. And they were surprised. Don't you think Uncle Titcomb was rather ungrateful? He can't say he wasn't surprised? How could I help his getting seven respirators? And the idea of your buying one! But do you know what he's gone and done?" and from the way she said it I made sure that he had done something very bad.

"He's gone and got bronchitis! What do you think of that? And after getting all those respirators, too! But there, that's just like Uncle Titcomb! I was annoyed with him."

Now, according to Maria, there are two kinds of women in the world; one sympathises and doesn't worry, the other worries and doesn't sympathise. Maria herself belongs to the latter.

"And do you know what Mrs. Dillbinkie did? She never took her present home at all. The house-maid found it behind the piano. Bad manners, I call it. However, it'll do for next Christmas. Next Christmas I shall have a tree, because everybody had such a good time the other night. But by that time there's another thing I do hope to have," she said

as she rose and shook herself into place, “and that is a butler.”

“Is he to hang on the tree or to be a surprise?” I asked mildly. But as I have said before, Maria has no sense of humour.

XX

MARIA AT PRINCE'S SKATING RINK

A N old-gold plush railing framed the long rectangular surface of the ice. On either side of the hall behind the gold plush was a narrow platform raised somewhat higher than the ice, along which, against the balustrade, stood a row of little tea-tables where onlookers in smart furs sat drinking hot tea and gossiping, or idly watching the whirling, flying, and stumbling crowd of skaters. There were faint flurries of snow which the electric light turned into diamond points as they floated up from the ice under the cut of the steel, and the air, too, was full of the click and scratch and grating of skates and the swish of skirts. But the faces of the skaters were set and serious; the sound of gay voices was wanting. High up at the far end was the gallery for the band, with a painted background of Egyptian landscape which extended all around the hall and formed a pleasing contrast to the furs and ice below. But just then the musicians were lolling idly back in their chairs, and a couple of bass-fiddles leant heavily against the Pyramids.

Halfway down the hall, behind the gold plush,

Maria, the Count and I sat at a little table and drank tea. We had already had two relays of hot tea-cake, although whenever Maria glanced at the Count's plate it was empty. She herself was soaring on higher planes, where hot tea-cakes are out of place. Still, to do her justice, she kept on ordering more in a princely way, and the melted butter seemed to mount to the Count's eyes, for they grew quite shiny.

Everybody who wasn't skating was drinking tea, and occasionally a skater panted up to the barrier for support or compliments. Maria put up her lorgnette to watch a gyrating young man, and declared it was the poetry of motion, although just as she said it the young man's legs gave way under him and he sat down with a thump that must have nearly dislocated his spine. All the same Maria insisted, with a vague sigh, that it was the poetry of motion. I watched the poet of motion pick himself up and heroically resist the temptation to rub the suffering locality.

"Really, you should skate," and Maria looked eloquently at the Count who gazed uncertainly at the last slice of tea-cake.

We had gone to Prince's to see Diana skate, and we meant to surprise her. Maria assured me that the Count was dying to see Diana skate, but so far Diana had very obstinately refused to be seen skating. She explained that she did not wish us to come until she could keep her feet; which seemed reasonable.

As for the Count my knowledge of his feelings was entirely through Maria. He may have been emotional but he was certainly inarticulate, at least in English.

It was only when Diana coaxed her mother for a dark blue velvet skating costume of an unexpected shortness that I began to suspect Diana of unsounded depths. It was then, however, that Maria decided that Diana could not possibly have much more to learn, for she would certainly not want to fall recklessly about in anything so expensive. Therefore she felt it was quite safe for us to surprise her. And here we were waiting for Diana.

Maria looked very gracious as she sat behind the old-gold plush drinking tea and calling the Count by his title rather oftener than was strictly necessary. In a way the Count's title gave her a kind of moral support, on the strength of which she was sometimes rude. Besides, the Count was decorative and he looked unemployed; the right kind of unemployed of course.

In the beginning Maria and the Count overflowed with enthusiasm, and the Count flourished his hands about in true continental ecstasy, and he declared the skating ladies were angels and swans and other lovely things, in his poetic Italian way. But after another relay of tea-cake we vaguely felt that something was wanting. The aimless flight of the same tangle of people up and down the hall began to pall on us—the hatless men, the women in their short

skirts, and all with set, severe faces. A few floated like thistledown over the ice, but only a few.

The Count looked inquiringly at the empty cake dish and Maria, with an indulgent smile, ordered more from a smart young person in puffs and red ribbons.

"Something is wanting," I said, politely, trying to suppress a yawn.

Maria was quite offended and said it was ethereal; but she did not even try to suppress her yawn.

"And I do wonder where Diana is," she was just saying very crossly, when down from the gallery there floated the long drawn out note of a violin, awakening, insinuating, haunting. Then I realised what was wanting. For, suddenly, as if touched by a magic wand, the aimless skaters began to move as if under a spell. The hatless men bowed gallantly to the serious ladies, and the set, severe faces melted into smiles; and eyes sparkled, and cheeks glowed as the hatless men, with their arms encircling the ladies who had been so serious, floated and swayed to the haunting rhythm of a waltz. And all the men looked heroes and all the women were fair!

It was the triumph of music.

Even behind the old-gold plush nobody escaped the spell. The smart women in their great hats kept time with nodding plumes to the entrancing rhythm, and even Maria beat time softly with a plated tea-spoon, and there was a look on her face with which Samuel was probably unacquainted.

The Count's eyes rolled in rapture. "Zis is 'eaven!" he murmured. He was quite melted, and as he leaned forward with his elbows among the tea things, he sighed in ecstasy. Possibly he felt the need of a safety valve, for he made a sudden, frantic dive into his pockets.

"I go fetch a cigarette. I 'ave forgot 'im. Pardon!"

"What I have missed," and Maria looked mournfully after the Count who threaded his way past the little tables with his shoulders hunched up in apology.

I must say I was shocked until I saw Maria gaze with the same mournfulness after a slim, weedy youth, who floated past hand in hand with a lovely young thing with perfect ankles and a Polish cap. Interpreted by the music their flight could only mean that they were bound towards some celestial region till death do them part.

"If I could only live my life over again," Maria murmured dreamily, "I should certainly learn to skate."

"It isn't too late yet by a good deal," I said encouragingly, trying to overcome the enervating effects of the music diffused by the Arch-Magician, in a tight blue uniform, in the gallery. "Just look at that nice old man! How well he skates and I am sure he is older than you," and I pointed out a white-haired patriarch in gold spectacles, who flew past with a goddess on skates.

"I couldn't possibly resist it," and Maria fastened her eyes on an individual who shot past in the attitude of the Mercury of the Piccadilly Circus fountain.

I looked at Maria with some concern; she was certainly developing unexpected emotions. Nor did I approve of the way she looked after the Piccadilly Mercury with astonished eyes as if she were looking at a vision of the Unknown.

"Shall I order some muffins?" I suggested, to bring her back to earth and to counteract the spell of the music. For of course it was all the fault of the music.

"You are so prosaic!" Maria retorted. "To talk of muffins!"

And, indeed, the Magician in the gallery was evoking melodies such as never were.

But what did Maria mean when she said she couldn't resist? Resist what? Surely not the Piccadilly Mercury? She did not know him from Adam. She certainly couldn't mean the Count, for he was destined for Diana, and I was sure that Maria had no intention of allowing the Count's title to escape her. She was only waiting for Samuel to give the Count something to do in the business. She had not yet consulted Diana, but in a way that seemed unnecessary, for she felt sure that Diana must want to be a countess. It was lucky for her peace of mind that she did not know how that ungrateful child had boxed his ears on Christmas night.

"If any one," Maria said, and leaned over the table until her hat brim hit my hat brim, "if any one were to ask me to elope now, I'd do it."

"Well, I must say! I am thankful the Count hasn't come back," I remonstrated. "What are you talking about? Think of Samuel!" I was quite bewildered.

"I don't want to think of Samuel," Maria retorted gloomily, "I'd rather think of anybody else!"

"Maria!" I exclaimed shocked. This was indeed the spirit of revolt; and after twenty-one years.

"I haven't had any romance," Maria cried rebelliously while the violins sobbed and wailed tremulously overhead.

"I'm so tired of ordering Samuel's breakfasts! I'm so tired of seeing cook every morning! I'm so tired of Samuel's boots! Life seems full of Samuel's boots. I'm so tired of Samuel's neckties and the way he brushes his hair. I—I—want something else! I—I—want——"

Maria stopped, her eyes fixed in a hypnotic stare at the Piccadilly Mercury who just then happened to float past upborne, as it were, by a lovesick, long drawn out note of a violin.

"I want," she repeated vaguely, but I never found out what she really did want, for with a last lingering wail, the music in the gallery mercifully ceased, and Maria blinked and looked about in a dazed way as if she had been asleep.

"I think," she said vaguely, "I think I want some muffins."

Just then the Count threaded his way back between the picture-hats that, having recovered from the spell, were turning their attention with renewed energy to tea. The Count held his hat clasped to his breast with both hands, and was abject in profuse apologies. He was full of dramatic fervour.

"I 'ave zee Signor Smiss an' ze Signorina," and he waved his hand towards the glass screen that shelters tea-drinkers against draughts.

"Ze Signorina 'ave on ze skate, an' is drinkin' of ze tea wiv 'er fadere an' anozzer Signor. Zey will 'ave a zerprise ven zey zee you. I not speak to zem bekase of ze zerprise."

"Signor Smiss and another man!" Maria exclaimed mechanically. "What can Samuel be doing here? And who is the other man? Why, there's Diana near the screen—just stepping on the ice—and a young man—for goodness' sake if it isn't—O!" Maria cried, and she rose and her indignant eye darted towards the glass screen and caught the wandering eye of Samuel who stared at her obviously petrified.

And just then Dicky held out his hand to Diana and they floated off, and even at that distance I could see that they were not skating at Prince's at all but in a rose-coloured paradise bounded neither by Rutland Gate nor Hill Street, a divine country through



DIANA IN BLUE
(PRINCE'S SKATING RINK)

which young things pass only once in their lives. And Dicky was handsome and strong, and Diana was in dark blue velvet with an enterprising feather on a coquettish hat, all of which she had coaxed out of her long-suffering mother under false pretences. And she smiled, and sparkled and glowed, and neither looked at the other for fear Prince's might guess, and yet they saw nobody else in all the world, and they were as happily oblivious of Maria as if she were in Bayswater.

"I—I—must see Samuel," and Maria spoke as if she had mislaid her breath. Even the Count looked unpleasantly surprised as he stared after Diana in blue and the tall, young man with a thatch of black hair and keen bright eyes who was waltzing about with Diana in blue as if the words to the magic melody that floated down from the gallery were "I love her—I love her"—*ad infinitum*.

Maria flew along and I hurried after with her furs. We left the Count alone with melancholy and the tea things. Maria had received a terrible shock. Samuel had hoisted the standard of rebellion. She felt it was now or never with him, and by the time she had reached him behind the glass screen she was panting for breath.

Samuel sat alone at his little tea-table with the disordered tea things. There was a cake with a checker-board design in sugar in front of him.

Maria glared at him across the checker-board pat-

tern and her lips trembled. It was tragedy of a comic kind.

"How dare you encourage that without my consent?" and her voice shook. The space behind the glass screen was quite deserted except for Samuel; everybody else was skating.

"And you know well enough—better than anybody, that I will not—never—never—never"—and Maria stamped her foot—"permit"—here she broke down—she was breathless with anger.

"Sit down, Maria, and have some tea," said Samuel.

The whole place was weltering in melody. Behind the old-gold plush the women in the big hats were again keeping time with their heads, and I caught a glimpse of the Count amongst the tea things moodily puffing curls of smoke. Maria stood leaning on the table with both hands; the tea-cups rattled with emotion—her emotion. She looked down at Samuel, and Samuel, who was never dramatic, looked at the cake as if it were a problem which he must solve.

"I insist on Diana's coming home with me at once!" Maria shot out her words in little gasps. "She shall never marry a draper from Brixton!"

Samuel detached his gaze from the cake as if he had solved the problem.

"And she shall not marry an impecunious Italian count with a tuppenny ha'penny title, whom I've got to support."

Maria stared at Samuel as if she had never seen him before.

"Please take Maria home; she is rather upset," and Samuel turned to me. "And you needn't worry about Diana, for she's quite safe here with me. I usually go with her. I like to see her enjoy herself. Young Hicks has been coming of late. He is a fine fellow. I should be glad if they liked each other. Don't be so foolish as to interfere. He won't stand any interference; and he evidently likes Diana in spite of you. And the child is to have the happiness she wants and not what you want."

But Maria wouldn't go home. Instead she dropped into the chair beside him; his arm was on the table and she put her hand on it, though he tried to draw it away.

"Listen, Samuel, and just think how hard I've worked to—to raise the family. It would be so dreadful to have it all thrown away. He's so—so ordinary and retail. And it isn't even the West End, but just Brixton," and Maria shuddered. "You are so unjust to the Count. He told me all about his family. His title is quite right, and he's such a gentleman, and one hasn't to tell him things. And he'll fit in so well, and it would be so nice to have our only child a countess. I really never expected that she would have such a chance—for it is a chance! And I've planned it all out. They can live with us, and one butler will do for both. You can't expect to

marry a nobleman unless you support him: everybody knows that. But an Italian nobleman comes so much cheaper than an English one, and sounds nearly the same. And just think how proud you'll be when Diana is presented at Court on her marriage," Maria said with deep feeling, and she patted his arm quite tenderly. "And next year she can present me, and I'll find out if the Count can present you at a levee——"

"In an apron?" Samuel asked and wriggled his arm away, and his eyes encountered Maria's. And for the first time I observed that behind the mildness of Samuel's mild blue eyes there was something as hard as steel. Indeed how else could he have created Smith Limited?

"I think I'll go back and pay for the tea," I interposed hastily. For I was quite sure that the Count would sit there forever before he would dream of paying. But, of course, that is so like a nobleman. Then, too, I think there are times when husband and wife had better have it out alone.

XXI

MARIA AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY

IT was this way. Maria said she really felt obliged to go to the Academy if it was only to say she had been there. If she didn't go she didn't feel in it; and it was a satisfaction to say that she had been and how dreadful all the pictures were. For it was the proper thing to say they were dreadful, because that showed that you knew something. But if you said they were nice that showed you didn't know anything at all. Indeed she observed of criticism in general that if you don't know it is always safe to say that a thing is horrid.

Maria, enumerating its other advantages, said the Academy is certainly cheap; only a shilling. She didn't know of a place in London, she added warmly, where one could see such nice clothes and so many pictures for only a shilling. And if you don't want to you weren't obliged to look at the pictures. Indeed, Maria remarked with a good deal of tolerance, it was her opinion that Art was decidedly superior to music, for it didn't make a noise; that was a great thing. For if one heard music it was impossible to think of anything else, but if one saw pictures

one didn't need to think of them at all. Besides, one could go to the Academy in a 'bus and, she said with a sigh, it was one of the few nice places left in London to which one could go in a 'bus and not pretend one had come in a taxi. And then, too, she said, the Academy was such a great place for hats.

"You remember that sweet one with the green feathers I had last summer?" and she looked dreamily at me, "the original of that was at the Academy. I followed it about for a good half hour and studied it back and front. It was on a marchioness. Then I went straight to my milliner in Westbourne Grove for fear I'd forget and told her just how it was trimmed. Looked three guineas; was fifteen shillings. So," Maria concluded in a broad-minded way, "I believe in Art."

I agreed with Maria that a shilling was not too much to invest in a knowledge of Art, therefore we went to the Academy together in a 'bus. From the moment Maria stepped out of the 'bus near the Burlington Arcade I saw the elevating influence of that majestic pile—Burlington House, of course, not the Arcade—fall in a chastening way across Maria's usual expression.

As we passed through the sculptured gateway into that monumental quadrangle Maria put on the expression she usually reserves for church.

"My dear," she said, "whoever the family was

who lived there before the pictures moved in, must have needed enough servants to have kept a private registry office of their own."

Maria was overflowing with a philosophy which required no answer.

"Who," and she shook her head, "who cleaned their windows?"

I did not reply because I knew she did not want a reply.

"Even at tuppence a window—and they couldn't have got them done cheaper,—think of the expense! I suppose the nation washes them now."

"The nation does not wash them," I said as I threw a comprehensive glance around.

"What a great thing it is always to be surrounded by Art," Maria continued with some enthusiasm as we passed the policeman at the entrance. He was leaning against a pillar and yawning behind a big white wash-leather hand.

"I dare say," Maria remarked thoughtfully, "what he doesn't know about Art isn't worth knowing. One can see the refining influence in his face."

I must confess that all I saw when he emerged from the wash-leather hand was a very wooden countenance behind a bristly black moustache. I could not help thinking Maria exaggerated the influence of Art.

Maria paid her shilling and I paid mine and she suggested that one catalogue would do for us both;

then we climbed the red carpeted stairs and emerged amongst the statues in the Rotunda.

"What I don't like about statues is that they leave one cold," and Maria made an effort not to yawn, "but what is really nice about them is that they can be washed. That's the realism of them; it brings them so close to nature, and there is nothing like nature, is there? But of course they don't furnish like pictures, do they? One wouldn't think of putting the statues of one's family in the drawing-room. They would look horrid even with the New Art. The only persons I know who have statues are the Fauntleroy-Joneses and they only have them in their hall. But of course nobody who doesn't keep a footman would think of having a statue. There's a fitness in all things. Besides, it isn't really Art for the home, is it? But if you get pictures to go with furniture, nothing furnishes so. You remember the Kiffs? And the lovely pink pictures they have in their pink drawing-room and the blue pictures in their blue drawing-room? I call that taste.

"There, don't bother about the statues any more; they are so tiresome and stiff! For goodness' sake, come in here and sit down. There is nothing makes me so sleepy as Art. It makes me want to yawn all the time. Especially when it's so mixed up. Now give me the catalogue. I think it very selfish of you to keep it, seeing that I paid my sixpence! The walls look just like patchwork, don't they? That? That's

Columbus discovering America, and if it wasn't for the frame that Venus's feet would be right on top of that astonished savage. No wonder he's astonished. And here is that nice Sheriff on the other side of her, and what a lovely red cloak he's got on! He's looking at Venus just as if he'd like to talk to her, only he can't because of the frame; besides he wouldn't, being a sheriff. And there is 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' right on top of the 'Mother's Prayer.' Oh! dear me! I suppose it's all very beautiful, and one's got to look at it at least once, but it's that mixing up that tires my mind so. I really must lean my head back and close my eyes.

"You take the catalogue and look up the good pictures. The only good pictures are by the R.A.'s or they wouldn't be R.A.'s. We will look at them first, and then if there's anything left of us we'll do the A.R.A.'s. What I like about the R.A.'s is that one's so safe to like them; one can like the A.R.A.'s, too, but one mustn't like them so much as the R.A.'s; that wouldn't be safe. Afterwards if we ain't dead we'll look at the other pictures, though they don't count. There, let's sit down again!" and Maria fell exhausted on a centre seat.

"Tired? I'm a wreck. But I must say the Academy seats are nice and puffy, but of course they can afford it. They don't have to pay a single penny for all those pictures, but if I should want to hire one or two at Whiteley's, I rather think they'd make

me pay. I'm going to lean back and try not to see anything."

Maria and I had strayed into the main gallery and the seat into which we had fallen exhausted happened to be opposite the full-length portrait of a lady in a garden. The lady looked very expensive. Maria opened her eyes and examined her approvingly.

"What a sweet portrait!" She was quite captivated. "And doesn't she look stylish? Now I call that a dressmaker! Looks just as if she'd been poured in, doesn't she? I always say, unless you have a good dressmaker you can't have a good portrait. Then her hair, too. That sweet curl and those puffs. It couldn't be done on the head. I'm sure it's all pinned on. Looks so, doesn't it? What a great artist. And isn't she high-bred? And how on earth does she keep that cloak on? But of course she couldn't possibly keep it on if it wasn't painted. Sweet face. I feel just as if I knew her. Now that's a portrait I call a picture. That furnishes. A face just like a benediction, isn't it? Only people with faces like benedictions are usually so badly dressed. I do wonder where I've seen her. Now isn't that too dreadful. There is Mrs. Dillbinkie. What a nuisance! And Mr. Dillbinkie. And coming straight here. How I do hate that woman. But I think I can tell her something she won't like to hear."

However, Maria put on her company smile which made her mouth quite square, and Mrs. Dillbinkie

languished up in a last new creation and sank down beside Maria, while Mr. Dillbinkie gave a series of bows, and was about to sit down next to his wife, but she gave him a look, and so he crossed over to me.

"How lovely of you to come," Mrs. Dillbinkie fluted to Maria, who drew herself up and looked down at Mrs. Dillbinkie from the edge of her eyelashes.

"I always go to the Academy; I make a point of it. One must encourage Art," Maria said in a stately way.

"How public spirited. But I didn't see you at the Private View. I was looking about for you everywhere," Mrs. Dillbinkie cooed.

Maria turned white; she had not been invited.

"One can't go to all the things to which one gets invitations," and she rallied.

"We were here all day because of the portrait," and Mrs. Dillbinkie wriggled her shoulders in an excess of modesty.

"Oh! really," but Maria exhibited no further interest.

"What do you think of it?" and Mrs. Dillbinkie pursed up her lips.

"Think of what?"

"Why, my portrait," and she looked plaintive.

"Where is it?" Maria asked coldly.

"Why there—right in front of you," and Mrs. Dillbinkie's eyes blazed. "They say it's the portrait of the year, though I oughtn't to say so," and she gave another modest wriggle. "Do you know what I'll do,

though it'll be rather awkward for me, for of course everybody'll know. I'll stand beside it, and then you can see how good it is," and she rolled her eyes around the long gallery dotted by stragglers in every state of exhaustion.

"That you!" Maria exclaimed in the rudest kind of astonishment. "You don't mean it? Why, I never should have known it! I was just saying it was the loveliest creature I had ever seen. And to think it's meant for you! Do stand beside it; you needn't mind—nobody'll recognize you," and Maria smiled as one who has found peace.

Mrs. Dillbinkie tried to say something but she gave it up; her lips were quite white and dry, and her long, thin hands clawed in her gloves. She looked at Maria with her big brown eyes and Maria looked at her with her pale prominent ones.

Then Maria spoke, and she quite bristled with indignation: "I call it wicked the way these painters paint one as one'd like to look! Why, the other day I saw the loveliest portrait of a girl. I quite raved about it until she came in. Then it was really painful. The man who did it had divided her by two. I wouldn't have believed she was so plain till I saw her beside her own portrait; I call it cruel."

In the meantime Mr. Dillbinkie on the other side of me murmured:

"Isn't it lovely? Can nearly hear it speak, can't you?" and he rubbed his nose along the silver handle

of his stick and stared devotedly at Mrs. Dillbinkie on the wall. "It'll be such a comfort to live with it," he said, and really meant it; he was so well trained. I was on the point of saying something but refrained. It was more interesting to study Maria and Mrs. Dillbinkie.

"Really?" Mrs. Dillbinkie was saying with the sweetness of honey that is just about to ferment. There was a white line on either side of her mouth.

"Oh! dear, yes," said Maria. "He adores her. He tells me everything. But of course she must do just as she pleases. I said to her father that I wouldn't think of influencing her," and Maria shook herself out and smiled.

"Really," Mrs. Dillbinkie repeated and she moistened her lips. "How very gratifying for you. How you will enjoy having Diana a countess. Dear Diana!"

"Oh, nothing is decided," said Maria, "but I can't help knowing how he feels—he doesn't try to hide his feelings, poor dear fellow."

"I suppose," Mrs. Dillbinkie cooed, "I suppose you know all about him? But of course you do. Still it is necessary these days when third-class travelling is so cheap. In a way it's dreadful to think how London is overrun by foreigners. Makes society so mixed. But I dare say you don't know so much of society as I do. And people who don't go into society much are so taken in. But it's so much nicer

to be trustful and innocent. I think you met him at the Crockers? But people in politics can't be particular, and so one oughtn't to hold them responsible. I remember now the funny things Mrs. Crocker said about the Count. She's got such a sense of humour. She puts in all the funny bits in her husband's speeches. She told me that she knew for a fact that the Count was sent over here by a syndicate to get married. Married to a rich girl, of course. And then he'll pay the syndicate handsomely out of her money and so they'll make a good thing of it," and Mrs. Dillbinkie smiled at Maria, and I did wish Maria wouldn't clutch her parasol; she looked just like Lady Macbeth.

"But people have to do such funny things nowadays for a living! Because of the unemployed, I suppose. The syndicate don't allow him much. I know he only has a room over a pastry-shop near Leicester Square, for Mr. Dillbinkie called on him there and found him busy making himself a necktie. Nice to be so handy. Of course I don't want to be too critical," said Mrs. Dillbinkie, "none of us are perfect in this world, but I do wish he wouldn't use so much benzine on his gloves. However, I dare say Diana will change all that. You ought to be happy to get such an economical son-in-law! Usually when they are so poor they get extravagant. I must call very soon and see dear Diana.

"But I hardly ever go to your side of the park, and

my chauffeur always loses his way when he's over there. But even if it is unfashionable, it's certainly healthy, and that's so much nicer than being fashionable. People over there always say they're built on gravel, and gravel is so much more important than being fashionable. I suppose you still have your little at-home days? And what day is it? I've forgotten. So stupid of me! But I'm coming very soon. Give my love to the dear little Countess. Now I must go. Come, darling," she cooed across Maria and me to Mr. Dillbinkie, and she lingered under her portrait in her patent attitude.

"Isn't it like her?" Mr. Dillbinkie said to Maria with admiring conviction.

"Like her?" Maria exclaimed, "why, it isn't any more like her than it's like you! So glad to have seen you both. G'bye."

Mr. Dillbinkie retreated backwards before Maria, and I could not help thinking that it was the original Brixton that spoke out of her. Even years of the West End had not quite taught her the Divine Art of hiding her feelings.

"Now I know what's the matter with her," and Maria struggled for composure. "I always thought she was in love with the Count, and now I'm sure of it! But I think I really must go home. The Academy is so exhausting, isn't it? And we haven't seen a single R.A. yet, not to speak of an A.R.A., and I've wasted a whole afternoon. And I won't come again,

that I won't! For I'm sure she'll always be there standing under that thing. Like her? Don't she wish it were! He is a great man. He knows just how a woman wants to look. I suppose he's the greatest of the R.A.'s?"

I examined the catalogue and discovered to our amazement that he wasn't even an A.R.A.

"Jealous," Maria said briefly, as we went downstairs. "Everybody is jealous. She is. Poor dear Count." By which I saw that Maria was still faithful to him.

As we turned into Piccadilly she said with her usual sense of justice: "They give too much for a shilling! I'm sure I never spend a shilling that makes me so dead tired. And I do think they ought to label the pictures by the R.A.'s, so that one doesn't admire the wrong ones. For it's so much easier to like a thing after one knows. And it's so stupid to like the wrong thing. I'm going home by tube. I don't want to see anything more! Give me the catalogue and I'll owe you sixpence. I want his address. To think that he isn't an R.A. Why, he ought to be the President!"

Maria took the catalogue and as we walked along Piccadilly she was plunged in thought.

"I declare," and she roused herself from meditation as we parted at the corner of Swan & Edgar's, "if he can make such a vision of beauty of that cat—what can he make of me!"





MARIA "IN OILS"

And, of course, Maria had her portrait painted leaning against the harp, just as she wanted. If she makes up her mind to do a thing she usually does it. However, when she showed it to me it didn't look quite right.

"Maria," I began, "it is very nice, but——"

"I didn't know you had set up as an art critic!"
She was quite offended.

"I haven't, Maria—there, don't get so angry!—but, you see—you see, you're leaning against the wrong side of the harp." And so it was.

She didn't speak to me again for a week, and then only because her cook had given her notice and she needed consolation. From cooks she easily turned the conversation to harps.

"Of course, I knew it all the time," she explained in her superior way, "but I had him paint that side because I like it best; it shows less string, and harp-strings are so untidy. Still, I am surprised," and she was most scornful, "you didn't know that the music sounds just as well on one side as the other."

So like Maria!

XXII

THE EMANCIPATION OF SAMUEL

FOR the first time Samuel presented to Maria a new and disquieting independence. Whenever she now urged the advantages of the Count, he retorted by changing the subject to young Hicks, until she loathed the name of Hicks more than ever. Sometimes, indeed, she was haunted by the suspicion that, possibly, Samuel had never cut himself so completely adrift from Brixton as she supposed. In other days he and Hicks belonged to the same Masonic lodge which had, indeed, conferred on Samuel the proud title of Prince of Jerusalem, a title, unluckily, not recognized by *The Morning Post*. And she wondered if, in his Masonic capacity of Prince of Jerusalem, he still went to the lodge at Brixton? The mere thought made her shiver.

It was the middle-class in Samuel, Maria thought mistakenly, that made him so indifferent to the social distinction of having a count for a son-in-law. She herself was tired to death of hearing Samuel talk of young Hicks's genius for the drapery business. Some people, he said, had genius for poetry and others for football, but Dick's genius had developed on

more useful lines, for he had just invented a new system of cash registration which would undoubtedly be an eye-opener to the whole retail trade. And as for his eyes, there never were such eyes as Dick's. Saw everything. For the first time Old Hicks could take an afternoon nap if he wanted to. Instead, however, he was going into politics for a change. There was a question of his standing for Parliament.

But even this left Maria cold. Her only child should not end as a Hicks of Brixton; she was to be a countess, and they would have a butler. But what would be the use of having a butler if he had nothing better to announce than the Hickses. She herself had suffered from a too unobtrusive name. Her child should not.

She sighed deeply as she confessed to me that Samuel had changed; he was not nearly so melancholy as he used to be, but he was much more obstinate. She asked me if I had observed a new look in his eyes? And, indeed, I had noticed that for the first time Samuel examined Maria in a critical and detached way. And one day I found her in tears, and tears are remarkably unbecoming to Maria; her nose gets so red.

"Samuel said," Maria sobbed, "that I was growing grey and it was time I knew I was growing grey. And I don't feel a bit grey," and she wept. "And he said the thing I put in behind doesn't match my hair and that it is too black."

I pressed Maria's hand with deep sympathy, although I felt that Samuel was quite right. It was too black.

But a man who criticises his wife's clothes, and notices that her hair doesn't match, has certainly entered on the last phase.

"And he says," Maria wailed, "that I ought to dress more—more motherly! More—more like Mrs. Hicks," and she wept with indignation. "And you remember years ago when she called in that camel's hair dolman? I shall never forget it! Never! And now to be told that I ought to dress like her!"

I looked at Maria and wondered if she had really ever known Samuel. Some women never do know their husbands until it is too late.

"And what did you say?" I asked curiously.

"I didn't say anything," Maria replied with spirit. "To hold Mrs. Hicks up to me as a model, indeed! I wouldn't stand that! So I sat down at once and wrote her that nothing in the world would induce me to let my daughter marry her son. That I had other plans for her, and I hoped I still had something to say in my own family."

"And what did she reply?" I asked dubiously, remembering the new expression in Samuel's eyes.

"She hasn't replied. There was nothing to reply."

"And what did Diana say?"

"Diana? I didn't tell her. But I know she'll love to be a countess. Any girl would. Think of

all the girls who come over from America just to marry a title. Why shouldn't she?"

"And when she's unhappy I suppose she can find consolation in her visiting-cards."

"Do you call that funny?"

"O dear, no. Still it's all some of them get out of marriage. And what does Samuel say?"

"It's what I say, not Samuel," Maria retorted, but as I looked at her I saw that her eyes were uncertain. For Maria although granite outside is soapstone inside. Some people are made that way. Samuel had accidentally penetrated to the soapstone.

Just then the maid brought up the tea things and two letters.

"A letter from Mr. Hicks but not from Mrs. Hicks," and Maria looked rather blank as she read it. Then she passed it to me.

Mr. Hicks had not wasted words. All he wrote was:

"I agree with you. My son shall under no circumstances marry your daughter."

"So that's over!" Maria cried in triumph. "Thank goodness, we shan't end in Brixton now!"

But Maria's triumph sounded hollow.

"One or two lumps?" and she held the sugar balanced over the cup, and she knows as well as I do that I never take sugar.

Whereupon she studied the other envelope.

"My dear, it's from Mrs. Dillbinkie. What can she want? How she does make me hate the smell of

violets; I always know when any one comes from her."

I guessed to whom she referred. Personally I prefer violets to benzine.

"But perhaps it's to ask us to dinner. It's time." Maria read the letter. "Oh!" she gasped and turned quite white.

"What is the matter?" I was just helping myself to bread and butter.

Maria twice tried to speak before she found her voice.

"It's dreadful—too dreadful," she said faintly. "That horrid woman. Just spite—spite."

Mrs. Dillbinkie's letter was unmercifully short. The important part was: "As you tell me he longs to be your son-in-law, I think he ought to borrow from you and not from me."

Mrs. Dillbinkie's letter enclosed another on thin foreign paper and in a foreign hand and the spelling was most erratic. It was, however, marked "private and confidential," possibly by the advice of a superior expert in begging, for this was spelled correctly. Both letters dropped into Maria's lap and she stared at them as if they were ghosts. I picked up the foreign letter—the Count implored Mrs. Dillbinkie in strange English for the loan of five pounds until his remittance came. And if she did not send it, he concluded darkly, there would be nothing left for him but to put an end to his unhappy existence.

"But where's the syndicate?" I cried aghast. Then I studied the letter again and pointed out to Maria the Count's want of confidence in Mrs. Dillbinkie's Italian.

"But I dare say he thought her heart would be more easily touched by bad English," I said.

But Maria wasn't listening; she was in a panic.

"Perhaps he is already dead," she wailed and clutched her hands, "and of course there'll be an inquest, and it'll all be in *The Morning Post*; we too."

I felt for Maria as I realised the tragedy of appearing in the wrong column of the *The Morning Post*.

"Just think of a real count being obliged to borrow five pounds, and then his impertinence to want to marry Diana! And you know how she loathes him! And I'm sure he's told everybody that I wanted him to marry her. As if I ever would! What shall I do! What shall I do!"

So like Maria! That's what she always says when she loses her head.

"And supposing Samuel should hear!" and Maria looked at me in terror. "I'll send him the money myself, and tell him to go away and never to come back again." Maria rose but she fell back against the arm-chair with the black-walnut grapes, for just then Samuel came in. Samuel also had two letters in his hand.

At least I guessed it was Samuel, for I never saw a man so changed. Even Maria stared at him aghast,

and then I discovered what it was. He had cut off all the long, thin straggling hair that he had so laboriously plastered over his head every morning, and there he was—bald, quite bald. And he had shaved off his military moustache, and he wore spectacles instead of the eye-glasses with the black ribbon. Men sometimes do that sort of thing, and the effect is awful.

Samuel had made a desperate effort for freedom and although I saw that he had emancipated his eyes, his mouth and his head, I wondered if he had also emancipated his soul? Samuel had reached the last phase with appalling suddenness; some men do. I looked at Maria. When she did speak it was in the voice she usually reserves for her best company.

"What is it, Samuel?" and she crushed the Count's letter and Mrs. Dillbinkie's behind her. I couldn't help thinking what would become of the drama if dressmakers obliged with pockets.

"So you have succeeded, Maria?" and Samuel spoke in quite a new voice. The old one had been rather muffled behind his moustache. "It seems you wrote to Mrs. Hicks declining an offer which has not been made."

There was a pause. Maria looked wildly about.

"Supposing Diana knew?"

"Don't! don't," and Maria stamped her foot. But Samuel was inexorable.

"It seems that Mrs. Hicks was, naturally, much

hurt and annoyed at your letter, and so she gave it to her husband. This letter is from him. You won't read it? Well, it's only to say that he's had a serious talk with his son and he thinks he has convinced him that should he wish to marry Diana there was no prospect of happiness in the face of such opposition as yours. He is glad that, by the accident of your letter, Richard can withdraw in time. He feels it is only just to explain the circumstances to me. And now," Samuel added icily, "and now that you have informed Mrs. Hicks that you have other plans for Diana, I should like to know what your other plans are."

Maria might have rallied to her own defence if it had not been for those terrible letters. For the first time in her life she could not answer.

"I repeat, what are your plans for Diana?"

"Don't talk to me like that! I—I won't stand it!"

I looked at Samuel to see if he had really emancipated his soul.

"Now, listen to me, Maria," and I saw for the first time that Samuel had long, thin lips that shut tightly, like the lid of a box.

"A letter has just been sent to me, written by the nobleman you destined to be your son-in-law." One corner of Samuel's mouth went up, but it wasn't a smile. Maria dropped into the brocaded chair.

The letter Samuel held looked so familiar. The

same paper, the same handwriting. The same “private and confidential” underlined.

“It seems you first met your Count at the Crockers, and that’s why Crocker feels some responsibility about it. So he sends me this letter from the Count because he has heard that the man is seriously interested in Diana, and he rightly thinks that I ought to know that the Count has tried to borrow money from him and also asked him to pay his board bill. Don’t you want to see it, Maria?” and Samuel held out a shabby, dingy ruled page torn out of a cheap notebook.

“Your Count—he isn’t great at English, is he?—writes that he is at his wit’s ends. He is waiting for a remittance, and if he doesn’t pay this he’ll be turned out, and then there’ll be nothing for him to do but for him to put an end to his unhappy existence. Do look at it, Maria. Not dear for a count—one pound, eighteen shillings and six-pence, which includes two shillings for teas and tuppence for laundry. Tuppence for laundry isn’t much for a count, is it? Wonder how he does it? I’ll pay your future son-in-law’s bill on condition that he disappears. Were those your plans, Maria?”

I thought he was going to say something more, but he only tightened his lips. Samuel in oils might have been his own son.

“By-the-way,” and he turned at the door, “Hicks

is standing for Brixton. There's a by-election on. He's sure to get in."

I had no idea that Maria could look so small and old. Her eyes were fixed on the door that Samuel had closed behind him.

"I wouldn't have him see these letters for the world," she said under her breath. She leaned forward and a wad fell into the fire.

As I rose to go she looked thoughtfully at me.

"Don't you think Samuel has a very handsome mouth?" she asked.

* * * * *

Hicks was triumphantly returned at the Brixton by-election. Everybody knew he would be. But the Press certainly took him up in an astonishing way. The papers overflowed with "Hicks M.P." He appealed to the popular imagination, for he belonged to the romantic school of the Rockefellers and the Carnegies. He was self-made from the bottom up with just a little help from a board-school. From the Brixton board-school he had graduated to a hardware shop in a Brixton side street where he swelled with grave responsibility every morning when he took down the wooden shutters; and even when he scrubbed he scrubbed with all his soul.

The Press pointed out that Hicks M.P. had got what he wanted, and that was prosperity, and prosperity was what the whole country needed; so they welcomed him to help a bit in the governing. There

was just then an outcry against the amateur in government. People said to govern a big thing a man ought to prove that he could govern a little thing. Hicks M.P. had proved that.

I was sorry for Maria. She never looked at a paper if she could avoid it; she was so afraid to see what she didn't want to see. Furthermore, Samuel announced one day that Smith Limited had dropped Sir Peter.

"I don't want any more ornamental figure-heads; don't need them," was all he vouchsafed.

Lady Tippett did not invite Maria to her next at-home, but that was after all only a just retribution.

As Maria said bitterly: "It's all give and take in this world."

I could see how unhappy she was by the way she did her hair. She didn't make the least little effort to hide the grey in front; and I was shocked to see how the thing behind had been made to match the thing in front, instead of the other way about.

"I feel grey all over, so what's the use," she replied when I remonstrated at her unnecessary eagerness to seal herself with the melancholy seal of old age.

"You might get a little box of blacking and keep young for years," I remonstrated.

But indeed it would have taken more than blacking to do that. Maria had aged so after that affair with the Count and the Hickses. As for Diana she had given herself up body and soul to slumming. In

a way, it was much worse than poetry. She had quite done with romance and waving her hair, and these days she never coaxed me up to her room to tell me things, and I must say I missed it.

Finally I made up my mind to go up uninvited, and wondered if I should find her in the red and green plaid as I used to when she needed comforting.

"Is she in?" I asked Maria. Maria was nearly in tears over the tea-things.

"Yes, she's upstairs, but she is going out—slumming, of course. And it seems to me sometimes as if I couldn't bear it," Maria sobbed. "This is her day for the clothing-club and her Mothers' meeting in Kensal Town. And what she knows about it I can't imagine. And then she has a slum dancing class, and it's just too dreadful! And she'll be sure to catch something and die, and it'll be all my fault!"

I was quite unprepared for such a tragic flight of imagination.

"She never contradicts me now and she never reproaches me, and I'm too wretched for words!"

I saw that Maria was suffering and I knew reproaches would act on her like a tonic. She was limp for want of reproach.

"For goodness' sake, if everybody is willing why don't they make it up?" I urged.

"He's never said he wanted to make it up," and Maria mopped her eyes. "And do you know what?" and she looked at me in despair, "last week he dined

with the Prime Minister, and before that with the Chancellor. His father, I mean. He was at the end of the list in *The Morning Post*; but still there he was. And if it hadn't been for me"—Words failed her.

I went upstairs and sure enough I found Diana wrapped in the red and green plaid writing in a formidable volume.

"Poetry?" I asked, encouraged.

Diana remarked in an elderly way that she had long ago given up writing poetry. The book was the account-book of the clothing-club connected with her Mothers' meeting in Kensal Town. I found it to contain an exhaustive entry of flannelette, unbleached calico, thread, buttons, pins and needles, and other familiar items of charity.

"That's the clothing-club book. I write down everything I buy for them; they give me a discount at the shops."

"It's a lot of trouble. I hope it pays, Diana."

"Pays? I should think so," said Diana. "Why the other day in the children's class when I told them that the sky's blue, they all ran out to see. They'd never noticed it before, and I heard them say: 'Why, the sky's blue, just as teacher says.' Now they think I know lots."

"Look here, Diana," I urged, "couldn't you reproach your mother a little?"

"What for?" But I saw that Diana knew.

"If you don't she'll die for want of a tonic. It's dreadful not to be reproached when one's done wrong. It's ungenerous. If one's reproached one can talk back and that's such a comfort. Your mother misses talking back——"

"There's no reason to reproach mother; it's all for the best," and Diana looked down at the clothing-club book.

"Don't you want to make it up with him? You've got on the old red and green plaid—so tell me, child."

We sat at the table and I held Diana's hand as I used to.

She did not draw it away but a tear splashed on "flannelette for a petticoat," and then with a sob, as if something had given way, she hid her face against my shoulder.

"It isn't mother's fault; it's his! He doesn't care. If he had cared he wouldn't mind whether mother wanted him or not. For I love him and I shall always love him," Diana said softly. "But it's no use talking; he doesn't care for me. And as for mother she must find some other tonic. But do you know," and Diana opened her brown eyes very wide, "she doesn't even say things to dad any more; very dreadful things I mean. But I do wish dad would let his moustache grow again! We're all frightened of his mouth, even mother. It's queer to have lived with a mouth all these years, and then not know it at all. Sometimes I'm homesick for the old dad I used

to comfort after mother talked to him. Poor dear! Nowadays he does all the talking, and I wish he wouldn't. There, I must be off. I've a dancing class. And mighty well we dance, though our boots are all patched. But our pinafores and ribbons are very smart. I give the ribbons. But we don't have any gentlemen, and we don't want them," and Diana hugged me at the front door.

"It wasn't the serpent that did the mischief in the Garden of Eden," and she shook her head. "It was the Man. There can't be a man in a real Garden of Eden," whereupon she hugged me again and ran down the steps. But she paused at the foot and came back. Diana is very conscientious; she inherits it from Maria.

She balanced herself on the lower step and looked up at me. More mischievously than I should have expected from a young person with an afflicted heart.

"I don't really mean that. I ought to, but I don't. I'm afraid what I do mean is that it wouldn't be a Garden of Eden without a man." Whereupon she ran down the street.

As I went back to the drawing-room I thought what an awful retribution it was for Maria to have a child with a sense of humour.

XXIII

MARIA ON HER WAY

THE maid showed me up to Maria's room.
"Where are you going, Maria?" I asked.

TUsually I can tell Maria's state of mind from her clothes, but to-day her clothes left me in doubt.

"I'm going to make a call, and I want you to come with me." And so far as it was in her nature to plead Maria pleaded.

She had on her hat, but it was not her best hat. And as she turned I saw that her waist-belt hung down behind, which proved more than anything how agitated she was. I felt that something serious must be up if she didn't care how she looked behind. I gave the belt a shocked pull.

"Do leave me alone! Don't bother!" she exclaimed pettishly.

"I'm sure I don't care if you don't," and I rose as if to go.

"Now you're angry, and just when I need you. So like you! And you know how wretched I am."

I quite forgave Maria as she fastened her belt in a fumbly sort of way.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want you to go with me to Brixton," but Maria avoided my gaze.

"Brixton!" I couldn't believe my ears.

"To—to call on Mrs. Hicks."

I looked at Maria and then at Samuel in oils on the wall, and then at Diana in oils, and wondered what they would say if they knew.

"Do you think they would like it?" I urged feebly.

"I don't care! Do you think I like it?" and here Maria began to cry. "I can't stand it any longer, and it can't be any worse than it is now," she sobbed.

"I've made up my mind to make it up with Mrs. Hicks if she'll let me, and I don't care what she says. It's dreadful for me to see how pleasantly Diana does all the things she hates to do, and never to have her contradict me even when I'm wrong, though of course, I must say, I'm not often wrong. And she's got such black rings round her eyes, and she's beginning to cough. I can't stand it any longer. She's at her Mothers' meeting again this afternoon, and what she knows about Mothers' meetings I can't imagine. I'm sick to death of flannelette, and why poor people's things should have such a horrid cut, gracious only knows! Afterwards she's got her slum dancing-class, and the yards of ribbon she gets for those children you wouldn't believe. She says it's good for their souls. Fancy! Anyhow, she won't know I've gone. So do come with me, for I daren't go alone."

We took the Brixton 'bus on the Bayswater Road, and Maria was so tragic that it was quite a relief to have her ask me, after we had been flung into our seats, if her hat was on straight.

"You see we can go by 'bus to Brixton, and from there we can take a taxi to the house. It'll look the same and be ever so much cheaper," she explained with a sigh. "I wonder if we shall ever be able to trust taxis? But I'm just too unhappy to live! Five-pence to Brixton? I don't believe it," she remonstrated, as the conductor held out a very dirty hand. "It isn't in the tariff; I'm sure it isn't! I shall complain to the company. What, looking at the wrong place? You should have pointed it out to me at once. Now, what under the sun," and Maria turned to me with an expression of patient endurance, "is that man so cross about?"

Our taxi swung into the drive of the great Gothic House in Effra Road. It had grounds and lawns and a glass *porte-cochère* and lamps on either side of the front door. In the background were some green-houses, and a gardener was carefully trimming the edge of the lawn.

Maria looked rather white as she rang the bell; it clanged. However, the colour came back to her face as a rosy-cheeked, affable maid-servant opened the door.

The drawing-room was very large and gorgeous. Everything shone, from the two crystal electroliers

to the grand piano. The furniture was all of pale satin brocade and very puffy, and Mrs. Hicks's poetry found vent in white embroidered sofa-pillows resplendent with pink satin bows. Over the mantelpiece hung a big portrait of Mr. Hicks in his scarlet mayoral robes and a splendid chain.

As the door closed Maria leaned forward and whispered with a sigh of relief: "They haven't got a butler! I'm so thankful."

I had considerable time to ponder over the reason for Maria's gratitude until Mrs. Hicks came, for Mrs. Hicks did not come for a long time.

Suddenly Maria started up. "Oh!" she cried and sank down again. I knew what ailed her: in her agitation she had forgotten to pay the taxicab and send it away. And there it was registering cruelly for all it was worth. We were helpless, and the panting of the unnecessary taxi seemed to accentuate Maria's misery, and it had reached an acute stage when Mrs. Hicks sailed in. Mrs. Hicks had evidently waited to put on something impressive.

She looked at Maria and Maria looked at her, and then Maria seemed to melt forward; indeed I thought she melted forward too much, and I held my breath and wondered what would happen next.

It is just possible that Mrs. Hicks did not see Maria's outstretched hand. Maria drew it back rather awkwardly as Mrs. Hicks waved us towards two low, puffy arm-chairs in which we sank as in a feather

bog. She herself sat in something stiff and stately from which she avoided looking at us in a superior way.

"Have some tea," she said at last and rang the bell, and the rosy-cheeked maid brought in by relays a glittering array of what was unmistakably presentation plate.

"How lovely!" Maria murmured in conciliatory ecstasy.

Mrs. Hicks stabbed her with a triumphant stare.

"Presented by the borough to Mr. Hicks when he was chosen Mayor," she intoned loftily.

Maria expressed her admiration and laid down the bread and butter with which she was trying to regale herself. Mrs. Hicks looked at her with a frozen smile and as Maria tried to avoid it she caught the painted eye of Mr. Hicks over the mantel-piece.

"Presented to Mr. Hicks by Brixton on his election to Parliament. Is to be exhibited at the Royal Academy," said Mrs. Hicks. "Do have some cake if you don't like bread and butter."

It was difficult to reconcile such animosity with a little stout woman with a double chin and a harmless nose.

Maria swallowed some tea and looked wildly about as if for escape from the greatness of Mr. Hicks; and she sought refuge in the grand piano with pianola attachment. She felt that this was safe.

"Presented to Mr. Hicks by the assistants of Hockin & Hicks in recognition of his services for the

amelioration of the condition of shop-assistants," Mrs. Hicks announced in the words of the engrossed presentation parchment, "there's an engraved silver plate inside," and she folded her podgy hands and raised her chin. "We don't play, but we hire a young lady to play to us once a week while Mr. Hicks takes a nap. That box? That's silver gilt. I thought you were looking at it."

I'm positive we weren't. It had the appearance of a glove-box on a stupendous scale.

"It contains an address from the borough and was presented to Mr. Hicks in recognition of the hospital which Mr. Hicks has presented to Brixton. It will cost twenty thousand pounds. Have some more tea?"

Having now established her eminence and prosperity, Mrs. Hicks let go her features.

"How proud you must be," and Maria looked piteously at Mrs. Hicks and tried to rally from this avalanche of prosperity and distinction. She would not have been so completely crushed had she not been sitting on such a low, soft chair. Maria hates low, soft chairs.

"Of course all these honours are very gratifying to us though only for our son's sake. It is a splendid inheritance," Mrs. Hicks admitted with awful modesty.

Maria was nervously biting her lips, they were so dry. And she looked at Mrs. Hicks with a stationary smile.

The taxicab outside was panting petrol away at a ghastly rate.

"Not that Richard will ever need to depend on his father's reputation," Mrs. Hicks continued with boastful humility, "he is quite capable of making his own way. Everybody says he is a genius. And although he is so young he is really the managing director of Hockin & Hicks. Hockin & Hicks are just about to build in the West End. Something splendid. Like Harrods, only more so. Do have some more tea! But as I say to my boy, he works and plays too much. It'll kill him. I do wish people would let him alone. The invitations he gets! I tell him not to burn the candle at both ends. But, then, one's only young once, and I do want him to meet just the nicest kind of girl and marry and settle down. She'll be a lucky girl who gets my Richard and I shouldn't think the worse of her," she said in a broad-minded way, "if she had a title. Great business houses like ours do intermarry with the nobility. A friend of mine, a widow in the haberdashery line, married a peer. But of course we are different; we aren't, say, like—like groceries," and Mrs. Hicks spoke in a critical, detached way. "But, there, how stupid I am! It's so long since I've seen you that I quite forgot you were in groceries," and Mrs. Hicks looked at Maria with patronising apology.

"But of course it doesn't apply to all grocers. Besides I hear that your daughter is engaged to a count.

I do hope he isn't a foreigner. Me and Mr. Hicks don't like foreigners. Still I don't suppose everybody can be English. Do give her our good wishes. She's a nice child without any nonsense about her. I always liked to have her father bring her. Perhaps you didn't know he did. They used to come very often. And now that she's, so to speak, settled," and I saw that Mrs. Hicks was beginning to let herself go and that her face was overclouding, "I think I may speak freely to you and without offence. So I hope you'll excuse me if I ask why you should have thought my Richard proposed to her when he hadn't? Do have some more tea? And why you should refuse him before he had proposed, I am quite at loss to understand! And," here the storm broke with terrific violence, "and why, after ignoring me for all these years, you should now come and call, I can't imagine!" and she looked defiance at Maria.

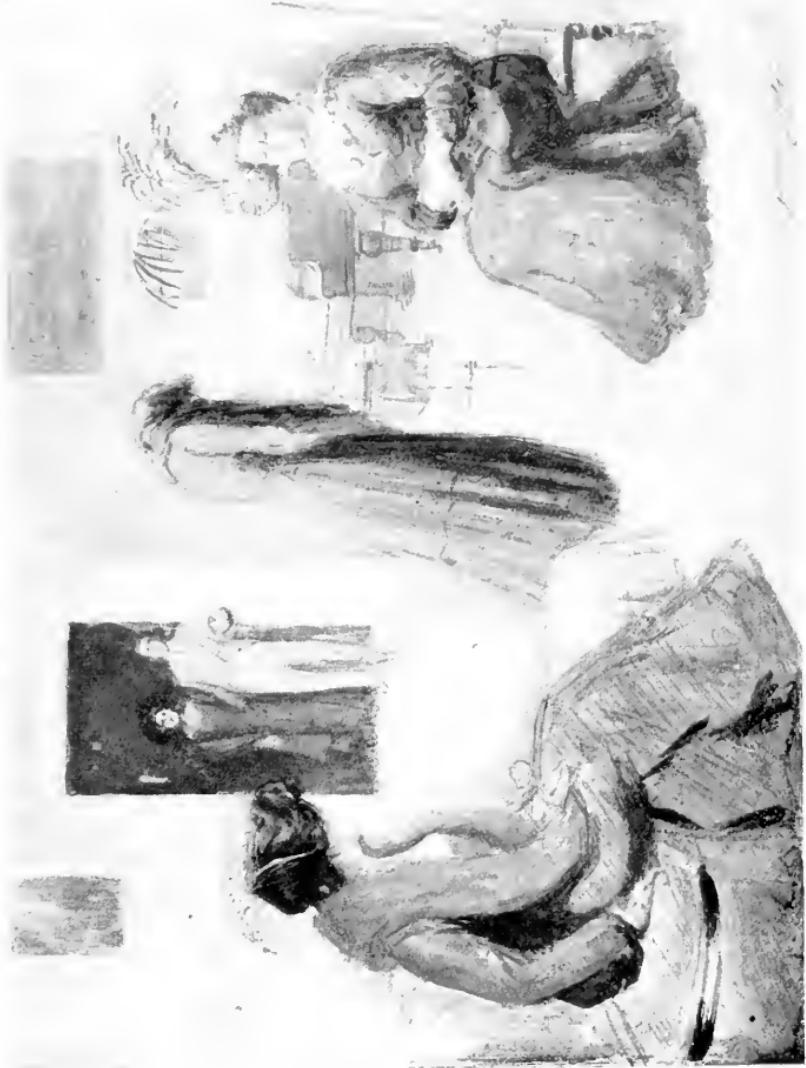
Maria rose. It was not easy, for the arm-chair was so low.

"I am ashamed. I ought not to have come," was all she said. Maria looked old and shabby.

"Come," she said to me. I felt she had made a mistake; she ought to have put on her very best dress and hat; they would have given her such moral support.

I passed the window as I followed Maria, and in the twilight I saw our taxi manœuvring slowly aside while another puffed up to the door in its place.

THE CRUSHING OF MARIA





Mrs. Hicks still sat in her stiff chair surrounded by the testimonials to Mr. Hicks's greatness, and in the dim light she looked very much like Buddha, only not so mild.

As Maria groped for the door-handle, Buddha spoke.

"Tell Diana she's to choose the handsomest wedding present from us money can buy." For Mrs. Hicks, though one of the best women, hadn't just then an ounce of compassion in her. She had fought a good fight for her Dicky and she swelled with the joy of victory. Refuse her Dicky, indeed, and before he had proposed!

Maria looked back in a piteous way, but just as she fumbled with the door-handle, there was the sound of hasty footsteps, and a gay, loud, peremptory voice shouted, "Mother! Mother!" through the house, and the two great crystal electroliers burst into a hundred tiny, twinkling, blinding lights which made us blink, then the door was flung boisterously open and there stood Dicky Hicks, and I saw that he held another hand in his grasp, but what belonged to that hand was hidden behind the door.

"Mother, I've brought you the best surprise in the world," he cried triumphantly. "There now, come, sweetheart," and his young, sturdy face was full of that supreme happiness that a man feels but once in his life. He was so overflowing with joy that at first he hadn't noticed Maria, who covered her face with her hands and tried to slip out.

"Let me go!" she implored.

He held her back with his free hand.

"You? You here? Why, we've been hunting for you everywhere! Let you go? Why, we want you more than any one except mother. Now see what I've brought you both!" and he drew Diana in from behind the door. Diana, her brown eyes full of shy happiness.

"She's afraid you mayn't want her, mother," he said to Buddha.

"O, mother," and Diana threw her arms about poor Maria and kissed her as she had never kissed her before. "I'm so happy, if only Mrs. Hicks won't mind, and you won't mind!" and she looked beseechingly across to Mrs. Hicks, still stiff and cold in her chair of state.

"I love him so," she said softly.

"Now, dear old thing, will you please tell me what is the matter?" Dicky asked peremptorily.

"Nothing!" Buddha replied shortly, but her lips quivered as she looked at Diana.

"Then be glad at once," said Dicky. "You ought to be, for your son is going to marry the very dearest girl in the world. And you know you love her! And many's the hour you and I have sat together talking about her, and you said she was just the girl for me."

"And that's the reason," and Buddha looked as if she was going to cry, "that's just the reason that horrid letter hurt so."

"Now don't you say another word about that letter, and don't you dare to cry! It's all over. There now, kiss me, dear old thing, and be glad!" and Dicky kissed all the Buddha out of Buddha.

"You dear, bad boy, how you do tumble me, and my best dress, too. And what'll your father say?"

"I haven't stolen a march on the governor. We've already been to the office and got his blessing, and we've left Di's dad with him and they are drinking brandy and soda to our happiness. Come now, that's a dear," and he drew Buddha gently from her throne, "and tell Di's mother how perfect I am!"

So they confronted each other, but neither spoke.

"I say, you have been crying," and Dicky stared at Maria. "What under the sun have you been crying about?"

And suddenly Buddha looked at Maria as if to implore her not to tell.

"I've been crying because—because I'm so happy," Maria sobbed.

"O, that's all right then," Dicky exclaimed gaily, "I was a bit afraid the dear old thing," and his eyes twinkled as he looked at his mother, "might—might—You see, I'm her only chick, and she won't have people step on my tail-feathers."

But it was Diana Mrs. Hicks took in her arms.

"You'll be good to my boy, won't you, dearie? He is the best, the most wonderful boy that ever was. And some day I'll tell you just what he likes

to eat; he isn't a bit fussy. And of course you'll stay to dinner, you and your mother, and father is sure to bring your dad."

"I'll take the taxi back," I suggested. I felt rather out of it.

"No, you're to stay here," Dicky insisted, and Diana gave my arm a little coaxing hug.

"I say," he whispered, and his eyes overflowed with fun, "how the two old dears must have gone for each other! You'll need some champagne. And now I'll send your taxi away."

Maria started up in consternation.

"I don't believe I've got money enough to pay him; he's been here for hours; what shall I do?"

"Never you mind, I'll see to it. It's all in the family. Come, Di, and let's make the taxi happy!" and they ran out and the taxi gave a triumphant toot as if he'd been made very happy.

"Is it enough?" Dicky called from the door-step.

"O, yes sir, yes sir," taxi cried with another toot.

"Is it too much?" Dicky shouted back.

"O, no sir, no sir," and we heard the taxi driver roaring with laughter as he puffed away.

I went upstairs with Maria while she removed the fray of battle. Everything was so gorgeous and prosperous. The silver-backed toilet things were so silver-backed and heavy; the lace over the bed was all real lace, and the carpet was the softest of velvet pile.

Maria cast a comprehensive glance about, although

she sobbed once or twice. But it was surprising to see how soon she recovered. She smiled at herself in the glass as she powdered her nose, and she already looked ten years younger.

"Am I all right behind?" she asked.

Mrs. Hicks waylaid her at the door. She was all smiles.

"I've so much to talk to you about," and she took her arm. "To think it wasn't true about the Count! But how people do talk. And the idea of taking a foreigner if you can get an Englishman." And they quite forgot me, and so I went down alone to the drawing-room.

I found Dick and Diana wedged into one of Mrs. Hicks's puffy arm-chairs in front of the fire, for, although it was still summer, it was a chilly evening. How they managed it, I don't know. Diana looked up hastily. I rather think her head had been on Dicky's shoulder.

"Do forgive me," and I retreated. But they wouldn't let me go, and so we all three sat on the chair. How we managed it, I don't know.

"So you knew about it all the time," Dick asked breathlessly.

I looked at the fire and forgot them both as old memories came back to me in the golden, glowing depths.

Dicky politely jogged my elbow.

"She says she's been awfully unhappy. Has she?"

"Yes, very," and I pretended I didn't know that he gave her a triumphant kiss behind my back.

"Say it again, but more of it!" He does order one about! Diana will have her hands full.

So I had to tell it all in detail, and repeat it at least twenty times. Men are so vain.

Still, as one likes to know both sides of the story I asked him, "And were you unhappy?"

"I unhappy? Rather!" said Dicky. I can't say that he is eloquent, but he has such humourous eyes.

"But, you see, there was the business to be looked after. A man can't be so unhappy as a woman; he hasn't time. But last night I'd got the cash register off my mind, there were no special worries and nothing particular going on, and I sat just here in front of the fire and thought. Lately when I've had any time I've thought a good deal about Di's mother; but—there, well!—that's over. But last night I couldn't think of anything but Di. Couldn't get her out of my head! Indeed I didn't want to. Finally I got so wild that I hunted up the governor and found him asleep in the library with the evening paper over his head.

"'Governor,' I said, 'I've tried to stick it out, but it's no use. I can't. I won't give up the girl I love because of her mother, and I'm an ass for taking offence. After all, I mean to marry Di, if she'll have me, and not her mother, thank heaven.'"

"Oh Dicky!" Diana murmured.

"There, sweetheart, you stay where you are. The taxi's gone, so anyhow you'll have to marry me. 'I've made up my mind!' I said to the governor, 'and I mean to marry Di if she'll have me; I can have it out with the old lady afterwards.' I told the governor even if I didn't get her I shouldn't think of doing anything desperate or rot of that kind, but the chances were that I might become hard and unpleasant; I felt it in me rather strong. The governor looked at me and all he said was, 'Good luck, my boy. She's a pretty girl and a good girl, and I think she takes after her dad. Speak to him first.' So I hunted up Di's dad at his office and talked it over with him, and he told me where to find her."

"And where did you find her?"

"Teaching the slum kiddies in Kensal Town to dance, bless her!" and I again pretended not to know.

"Well, how did it happen?" I asked.

Whereupon they both spoke at once.

"One at a time," and I put my fingers in my ears.

"You tell her; you'll do it best," and Diana smiled at Dick.

"How do you know he will? Don't you let him do all the talking. Mind, he belongs to the kind that have their own way. I dare say I shall call some day and find you in the red and green plaid."

But Diana laughed.

"I shan't want it again. I mean to give it away," and there was a look in her eyes, as I soon found out,

strictly reserved for Dick. I don't say Dick isn't nice, but no mere human man ever deserved such a look.

"Have you ever been in Kensal Town?" Dick quite ignored my forebodings, "and isn't it the loveliest spot on earth?"

"I've been there looking for a laundry. It didn't strike me as specially lovely," I said and meditated on the blindness of love, as I remembered the dreary, dusty out-at-elbows street, the shy, lean cats, the mongrel curs and the inhabitants given over to laundries but not patronising them.

"Then I'm sure you've never been to the Parish Room!" Dick cried triumphantly.

I admitted this.

"That accounts for it. I think it's the most beautiful room in the world. Don't you, sweetheart?"

In a way I couldn't help envying Diana. Of course not because of Dick, for he's a generation too late.

"It's behind a hedge and it's all brick inside and out, and benches and Scripture texts and a gas-stove; and Miss Mickleham was playing the piano for the kiddies to dance. I went there in a growler, for I was scared. I was afraid of what Diana might say. Of course it's a bit kicked, but you know what kiddies are. They will kick; it helps them to grow. There's no bell at the door, and as I stood outside waiting while the piano banged and the kiddies skipped, I got into such a blue funk that I very

nearly bolted, only just then a mite in a red cap, like a muffin, and a red cape skipped past. It looked exactly like a chick just out of the shell, and it stared at me sideways with a thumb in its mouth. I felt it was my only chance.

"'If you please,' I said, and it could see I was scared, 'would you mind telling teacher that there's some one outside who wants to see her?' Then it scooted through the door like a frightened rabbit, and I looked in. And Miss Mickleham was thumping the piano, and fifty beautiful pinafores were grand-ladies-chaining, and teacher stood in the middle of the room setting kiddies right when they got lost in other sets. And she never saw me till the mite in the red muffin shrieked out:

"'Teacher, teacher, a man wants to see you.'

"And then she looked across the bobbing kiddies at me in a frightened sort of way, and for a moment she hid her face in her hands. Still she didn't speak and she didn't look at me again. But I came in and sat down on a bench next to the mite who had hung up her muffin and who had on a glorious white pinafore. She was six, she told me, and she loved to dance and teacher always gave 'em ribbons. But why wouldn't you look at me again, sweetheart?"

"I was afraid you would see how happy I was," Diana murmured.

I pretended not to know what Dick did behind my back.

"And as soon as Miss Mickleham came to an end they all stared at me. But what I wanted to do I couldn't do with fifty pinafores looking on. So I dodged past the fifty pinafores and the hundred and four eyes, including Miss Mickleham and her spectacles, and I went straight up to Miss Mickleham, though I'd never seen her before, and I said, 'Please, I want those kiddies to make the awfullest kind of a racket, for I've got something to say to teacher that's fearfully important and I've waited six months and I can't wait a minute longer.'

"And dear Miss Mickleham's eyes twinkled behind her spectacles, and then she thumped 'London Bridge is broken down.' And in the middle of the most awful row, I seemed to hear Miss Mickleham say, 'I think you'll be able to tell her now.'

"And so after all these months Diana and I met in front of the gas-stove after I'd stumbled over Holdall. We couldn't talk because London Bridge was going so strong—and I couldn't kiss you, sweetheart, with fifty young ones looking cornerwise at us every time they curtseyed. And I don't know what I should have done but for a dusty bit of scenery across a corner of the platform. There wasn't much room behind it, was there, dear? And then that wretched beggar Holdall came sniffing up and Diana had to take him in her arms for fear he'd howl. So I had to put my arms about both. And just as I was beginning to feel so happy, and wished it would last forever, in



"A MAN TO SEE TEACHER!"

popped the mite with the red muffin. That is, her head.

"‘Teacher,’ she began, then she stared and then she bolted, and I heard her whisper outside to two other mites, ‘The man was a-kissin’ teacher,’ and I’m afraid I was,” Dicky laughed. “And when we came out, I really think I should have bolted, too, if it hadn’t been for Miss Mickleham, who said, ‘Ask ‘em to dance the lancers.’”

“And so I did. And I danced with the biggest of the lot, who looked like an infant charwoman growing up to a bonnet. She said to me, ‘We don’t dance the lancers like rich people; we dance it properly.’ And I rather think we did. And of course every one of them knew, only the kiddy with the red cap knew most of all. At the end I went on the platform and made a speech. Wasn’t it a nice speech, darling?”

And of course she said it was a lovely speech. As if she would say anything else—yet. And she looked very tenderly at him.

“I told them teacher and I were going to get married as soon as ever we could, and they were all to come to the wedding, and, it being our wedding, teacher and I were going to give all of them wedding presents: dresses and ribbons and shoes, but especially pinafores. I told ‘em that I thought pinafores the smartest things in the world, and so I should always expect teacher to wear one when she dressed up extra fine. You should have heard the funny

little petticoat squeals they gave for cheers, and Holdall barked us deaf and Miss Mickleham banged away at ‘God Save the King.’ ”

And then Dicky drew Diana towards him as if he didn’t care whether I saw or not, and Diana looked at him with that look he doesn’t deserve.

The dinner-gong saved the situation, and I rose with a sigh of relief. It requires a special talent to be a graceful fifth wheel to a coach.

“The next best thing to a good lover,” I said to Dicky and Diana as they came back again to earth, “is a good dinner. And you have made me desperately hungry.”

XXIV

MARIA'S ARRIVAL

MARIA had not only recovered, but she was full of an overwhelming joy.

"It's in *The Morning Post*," and she hardly took the time to say "how do" as I entered. "And how in the world do you think they heard?" and she pointed in chastened triumph to that sacred column which begins with kings and is the social thermometer by which one can see how the people who are in the process of arriving creep slowly up.

"And not even at the foot of the column," Maria said impressively.

"Aren't newspapers wonderful, and how they do find out things," and she held me with her eye as if she dared me to contradict her.

"How do they!" I murmured.

"But of course," Maria added, "they only trouble about prominent people."

"A marriage has been arranged," said *The Morning Post*.

"How often I've dreamt of seeing that!" and she took an ecstatic breath.

It was not for me to contradict *The Morning Post*,

but well I knew that Diana and Dicky had done all the arranging themselves, as *The Morning Post* would have known had it been at the dancing class in Kensal Town.

"And do you know what Samuel has promised me?" and Maria seemed to soar from triumph to triumph.

I tried to think of something superhumanly desirable, but gave it up.

"He's promised me a butler," and she looked quite offended because I did not go into ecstasies.

"I can get a really very nice one for half price," and it sounded as if she had found him at a sale. "He's over fifty; that's the reason he is so cheap. People nowadays don't like old servants; they're so tiresome if they get ill. But I thought an old one who's healthy would do to begin with. And even an old butler who smiles too much looks smarter than the crossest kind of a parlour-maid, don't you think? And as for a young butler he'd be too expensive to cook up to. Besides, Samuel says he'd rather practise on an old one, and I have to consider Samuel."

Maria consider Samuel! I couldn't grasp it.

"He's only temporary now. But of course you know him—it's Barnes. He says he's tired of being temporary, and he wants to settle. He told me he's quite worn out waiting on so many different kinds of conversation; one night heavy and the next frivolous. He finds it very trying to adjust his mind to it. So

he's coming as soon as Samuel's second best dress clothes can be altered to fit him. As soon as I have become accustomed to Barnes I shall give a party, because of Diana, you know, and," Maria cried in an outburst of hospitality, "I shall invite everybody. It won't cost any more, for we shall be obliged to have a link man anyhow, and an awning and a salmon and a band. And just think! There wasn't a word about it in *The Morning Post* when the Pontifex girl got engaged, or Angy Peck either. They will be annoyed. But of course this is different," Maria admitted with a superior smile. "As you know I do hate talking about myself and my family, and I wouldn't say it to any one but you, but it's no use talking, Richard is most remarkable. There's nothing he can't do. And as for Mr. Hicks, he is really wonderful. I never open a newspaper without seeing his name. So gratifying. I can't think how he does it. After all, there's nothing like a self-made man, is there? Talk about titles," Maria said with unspeakable disdain, "what does he want with a title? I consider Joseph Hicks one of nature's noblemen. And what they want with a House of Lords, goodness knows! I don't. And the more I think of it the more I feel it ought to be abolished."

By which I observed that Maria was turning her attention to politics, which was not surprising, as she was not only marrying into the House of Commons, but Mr. Hicks M.P. had invited them all there

to dine. Indeed the day after that great event she came so early to tell me about it, in a fearful state of exaltation and holding Holdall in a leash, that she found me giving Toby his breakfast.

Now Toby is a black Persian bachelor with yellow eyes and a red bow, and he loathes dogs, which Maria knows perfectly well. In an instant Toby was all electricity, back, and eyes like motor-lamps, and just as Holdall gave a growl and prepared for a leap I flew at Toby and twisted his Persian tail while Maria beat Holdall with her reticule and we dragged them apart and Toby was submerged in the basement.

Then Maria and I took breath.

"What a horrid cat!" she panted.

"It's Toby's house and it's his milk," I said indignantly, while Holdall hastily lapped up Toby's breakfast.

"I wouldn't be so ridiculous about a cat," and she spoke as one who revolves in higher spheres. "It's been such an experience," and she took a long breath.

"Then you should have left him at home. You know Toby hates dogs!"

"What are you talking about?" and Maria stared.

"Toby, of course, and that horrid dog of yours."

"As if you didn't know perfectly well that I was talking of our dinner at the House last night. I don't suppose you've ever dined at the House of Commons?"

"You needn't suppose any such thing," I retorted.
"How do you know?"

"You'd have told me over and over again. But I'll take you some day. Wonderful, my dear, wonderful, and so historical and thrilling. Only a family party; just ourselves. The Hickses were waiting for us in the hall where everybody waits for everybody. St. Stephen's, you know. All Gothic and pillars and statues. They use the statues for hats. So convenient. I wouldn't have believed Joseph Hicks could look so distinguished. I seemed to see him in marble already. Mrs. Hicks is the sweetest thing in the world, but I do wish she wouldn't wear so much duchess lace; it's so Brixton. Still people like the Hickses can afford to live anywhere; nobody minds. As for Diana, my dear, she looked like a rose, really she did! You wouldn't have believed she'd ever written a word of poetry. And you should have seen how attentive Richard was to me; I nearly fell in love with him myself. And it makes me so happy to think that I shall always have a fourth hand at bridge in the family. You should have seen how careful he was for fear I'd stumble going upstairs. Samuel didn't even look back. So like them after they're once safely married. And as for Richard's clothes! Fitted like a glove. And he had an orchid in his buttonhole. Ready for the Cabinet, I told him. For I feel sure he'll be in the Government some day.

"At first we stood about a long time in the hall waiting for dinner and staring at each other. So impressive. I must say I did feel that I'd arrived, and I kept wondering how often Government has the floor washed. And it was so thrilling to watch the members of parliament; all such distinguished-looking men. Those that weren't in evening dress were labour members; they won't wear evening clothes because of their principles—so noble. Made me think of Cromwell. But of course you don't know anything about members of parliament," Maria said condescendingly. "Intellectual isn't the word for it. They all look as if they were somebody. And even when they don't, one of course knows they are. Even the waiters look intellectual. And no wonder, when you think of what they have to listen to. Richard assured me that most of the governing is done in the dining-room.

"He knows everything. There was a splendid-looking man there with a silver chain. I thought Richard said that was the Chancellor of the Exchequer but possibly I was mistaken, for Mr. Hicks just then asked him for the wine-list.

"Mr. Hicks took in Diana for fear, he said, that Dicky would eat her instead of his dinner. He is so funny. So I went with Dick, and Samuel took in Mrs. Hicks. You don't know how I felt when I saw all the Government eating, just like ordinary men. Richard was so interesting. He pointed out where

Charles was tried in the very next room. King Charles, you know," Maria explained with forbearance. "Though I do wonder how they kept out the smell of cooking. I said so to Richard and he thought it over a long time before he could reply. Then he said it was a new historical problem. We sat on the terrace for coffee. I went with Mr. Hicks, so that Diana shouldn't be jealous, he said, he's such a funny man. But I suppose I am rather young looking to have an engaged daughter," and Maria settled her hat and sat up straighter.

"My dear, there never was anything so poetic! I simply never did! The terrace and the moonlight and all that sort of thing, and the little tables and the waiters, and everybody so smart and looking like somebody, and the river, the bridge, the barges and the 'buses, and on the other side of the river 'Lipton' in electric light all over the old shot-tower. Poetry isn't the word for it.

"And Mrs. Hicks was so lovely and confidential. We were just like two sisters, and she asked me if I could recommend her a good laundry, hers was such a trial, but she did hope Diana might be spared. You should have seen Richard wrap Diana up, and not the ghost of a breeze. They all do it at first. And how many miles they walked up and down that terrace goodness knows, I don't. Though I do remember how grumpy she used to be when I made her take walks with me. And I'm sure I'm as good company as

Richard any day, although I do say it who shouldn't. If I coughed at her once I coughed at her dozens of times, for I wanted her to lift up her white satin dress, for I'm sure Government doesn't wash the terrace very often, or why so many unemployed?

"And Richard was quite devoted to me; every once in a while he kept coming to ask if I wanted more coffee. Then Mrs. Hicks began to fall asleep with one eye—you know how?—and I let Samuel catch my eye and Mr. Hicks paid the bill. Lipton was putting out his lamps and the waiters were yawning as if they wished we'd go.

"As I said to Mr. Hicks, when they motored us home, I thought governing one of the pleasantest businesses in the world, and he said, 'You ought to know.' He is such a funny man!

"And now that Barnes has come, and Samuel doesn't mind him any more, I do wish you'd come some day and we'll talk over the party."

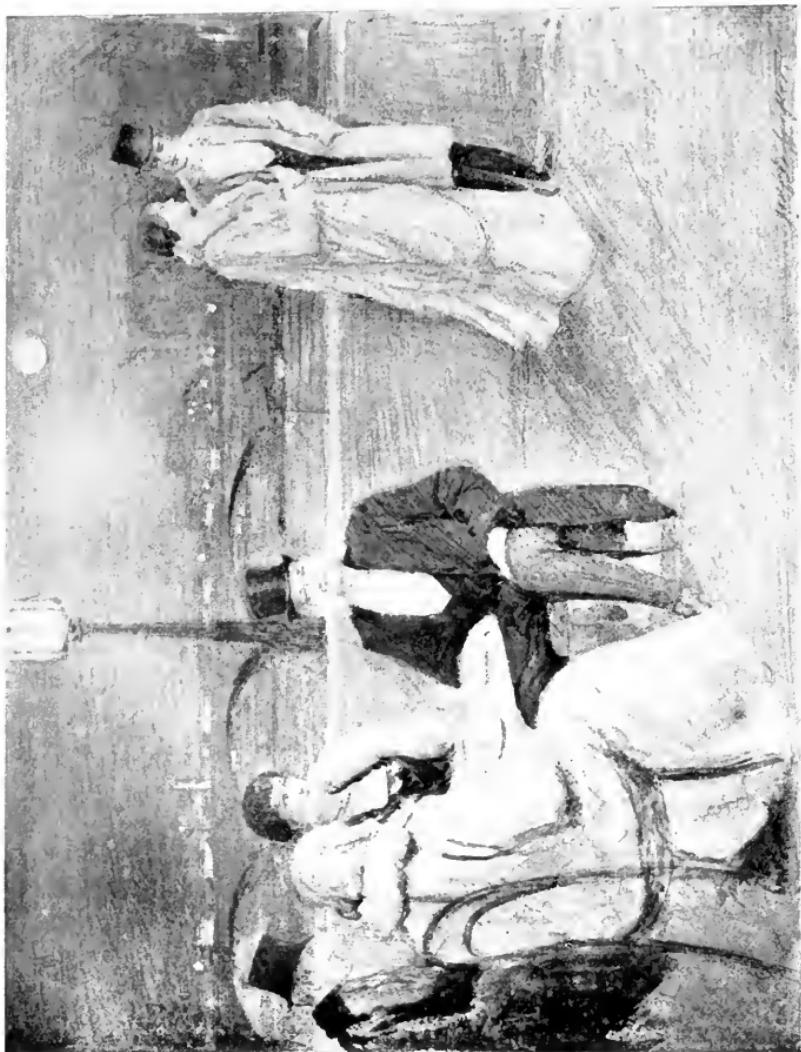
* * * * *

I found Maria sitting at the New Art desk littered with letters. Her back was as straight as a ramrod and she hadn't missed a hook anywhere.

"Everybody's coming," she cried, and I cannot do justice to her triumph. "Even Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones!"

For the first time I realised that Maria had arrived. The great Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones!

"Mrs. Fauntleroy-Jones stopped us as we were



MARIA ARRIVES
(THE TERRACE OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS)



going out of church last Sunday to congratulate Diana, and she said Mr. Fauntleroy-Jones was so looking forward to meeting Mr. Hicks. Did you ever! And just look at the flowers Mrs. Dillbinkie sent to Diana. Yards of ribbon; best quality. All the same I shan't introduce her to anybody. And, do you know, Lord McIntosh is coming and the Tippetts, the Jack Jephsons, the Pontifexes, the Pennortons and Angy Peck and the General, and the Crokers and the Kiffs, and the Simpson-Blotters—everybody! And Uncle Titcomb is having a new dress-suit made for the party. Even Aunt Martha is coming, though I wish she weren't. I felt obliged to invite her, but I never thought she'd come. And she's just written to say that she's made a new will and left everything to Diana because she doesn't need it, instead of the Plymouth Brethren, although she was very much hurt that I did not call her Martha. I shall have to try and hide her somewhere behind a palm. Caps are so middle-class. Sometimes I think it is worth going to see her just to ask her at least to put a wreath round her cap. Nowadays as long as you have a head you can wear a wreath. Doesn't matter how old you are. What kind of flowers do you think would look well with gold spectacles?

"And cook's worried to death for she doesn't know what colour of ribbon to put round the salmon, as a sash you know. It's to stand in the middle of the table. Poetic, isn't it? The band's to play in

Samuel's room where he keeps his boots, and there's to be bridge in the morning-room, and a dance after the old people have gone. As for Samuel! Never saw such a change. Hasn't mentioned getting buried since Diana's engagement, and as for money—he just pours it out."

"And what about the Count, Maria?" I asked. A little humility would, I felt, do her good.

"Don't speak of him! That horrid foreigner!" and she shivered in a superior way. "Think of Mrs. Dillbinkie flirting so with him. But of course I saw it all the time. She was dreadfully jealous of Diana and that was why she was so spiteful. But he must have known her very well indeed to have tried to borrow money from her! Poor Mr. Dillbinkie! Well-meaning but so crushed. I should hate a man I could henpeck like that. And do you know," and Maria shook her head, "Richard thinks he saw the Count in a little Italian restaurant in Soho. As a waiter, of course. Isn't it dreadful? How Mrs. Dillbinkie would feel if she ever met him that way at the Ritz. Embarrassing, rather.

"But the way people run after titles! I call it too disgusting! And Mr. Hicks always says that the middle-class is England's strength. And it's so nice that one can ask them to fight even if one can't ask them to dance. But of course, they can't all dance and they can fight. Titles indeed! And why a king should be a king I don't know. I begin to think that

there is something very broad-minded about anarchists. They don't mind whom they blow up. And when I consider how rude some people are who have titles I don't wonder anarchists do blow them up. There's Lady Tippett, the idea of her having a title! Most of her life she was just Mrs. Tippett; nothing else. She buys New Zealand mutton and pretends it's English. I don't call that noble! Give me a republic," Maria said enthusiastically, as she stuck on some ha'penny stamps, "I'm sick of titles. The world's too advanced for such nonsense! What is it, Samuel?"

For Samuel had come in with a telegram.

"Here's something that'll please you, Maria." And, indeed, Samuel himself was trying hard not to smile.

"Hicks wires to say that he's just been offered a baronetcy; I suppose because of the hospital. And he's accepted it more for Richard's sake than his own, he says. And so all three are coming at once to talk it over. Of course we'll keep them to dinner. This is pleasant, old girl, isn't it?" And Samuel rubbed his hands in some excitement.

Maria tried to speak but failed. Then she dropped into the brocaded arm-chair with the black-walnut grapes, and looked at Samuel as she may possibly have looked at him on their wedding-day, but not since.

"My dearest Samuel, just think, it'll be Lady Hicks," she fluted. "Lady Hicks, dearest Samuel."

"Not Lady Hicks yet, Maria," Samuel suggested mildly.

"One can't begin too soon, dearest. And to think that some day Diana will be Lady Hicks! How well it sounds: Sir Richard and Lady Hicks!" and Maria waved a stately hand. "And what will Barnes say! And in a way isn't it providential that we've already got a butler! You must be just to me, Samuel, and acknowledge that I've always been a great help to you! Coming right away? My goodness, what shall I do! I do hope cook won't lose her head. Sir Joseph and Lady Hicks! Doesn't it sound grand. And you must stay to dinner, darling, you who are the friend of my childhood. And on such an occasion. Won't it sound well at the party! I must say Barnes understands how to make the most of a title. And of course it'll be in *The Morning Post*—high up, you know—just under the earls," and Maria held her breath with awe. "Sir Joseph Hicks, Bart., M.P. and Lady Hicks. She'll have to begin and wear a tiara now. And I'm sure she'll look much better in a tiara than in a cap."

"You really must still call them Mr. and Mrs. Hicks," Samuel remonstrated.

"No, no, I won't. The King has made them Sir Joseph and Lady Hicks, and Sir Joseph and Lady Hicks they are. He probably calls them so himself. And I shall do just what the King wants me to. They shan't be called anything else in this house. You

can't make me, Samuel, so there! Is that you, Barnes? To pull down the blinds? Of course. I've something to tell you, Barnes," and Maria looked at Barnes as if she expected him to collapse on the spot.

"The new baronet Sir Joseph Hicks, and Lady Hicks are dining with us to-night. I want everything to be very nice. You remember Sir Joseph Hicks? Mr. Hicks that was?"

"Remember him, ma'am? Ahem! Many's the time 'e 'imself 'ave waited on me in the shop. I come from Brixton meself. Pardon, ma'am, the front door bell," and Barnes vanished.

Maria looked after him as if she had been turned to stone. I felt for her.

"The world is getting too democratic," and Maria sighed deeply. But just then the door was flung open and Barnes announced sonorously and impressively:

"Sir Joseph and Lady 'Icks, and Mr. 'Icks!"

THE END



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